

*The Holy Spirit
and
Revolutionary
Grace*

*God's Antidotes for Division
within the Churches of Christ*

by Jay Guin

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Jon Shoulders insisted, cajoled, begged, and “guilted” me into writing this book. Any mistakes I may have made are entirely my own, but you never would have seen them but for Jon.

My parents and siblings have been extremely helpful in proofreading drafts of this book, and have offered countless much valued suggestions. Who better than family to point out your mistakes!

Over the years, I have done much of my study by teaching classes on these topics, and my many students have adding incalculably to my understanding of the scriptures. I only wish that I could pass along to the students as much as I have gained from teaching.

Preface to Internet Version (2007)

I guess I'll never know how much impact this little book has had until God tells me in heaven. But I know it's had some impact.

At least two of our schools of preaching revised their teaching on the Holy Spirit based on the arguments presented here. I've had several readers write to tell me how they've been blessed by the book. The most dramatic letter relates how an entire congregation was changed—

That book really opened my eyes to things I had never realized before. My faith has been strengthened and I live a life of assurance and trust instead of insecurity and lingering doubts. ... Not that I did such a good job but with the help of Jay's book, [the preacher's] preaching (which has been more outstanding than ever) and the good Lord; this congregation has grown and changed greatly. Seemingly everyone *enjoys* being together for church services—and many other times. We have never been a part of such an alive congregation. Our fellowships are wonderful. We have a lot of new members and lots of visitors every service (guests are even bringing guests) and our membership is back up to 397 per [the church secretary] this week. Please tell Jay “Thank You” for having the courage to stand up and point out scriptures that have been ignored, downplayed, and misused for so many years by the church in general.

I have a friend in another state who is hugged by one of my readers every time she sees him. She says, “I know you know Jay Guin. You give him this hug the next time you see him! He changed my life!”

Being something of a perfectionist, as I've prepared this for posting on the Internet, I've made a few changes, but not many.

I've expanded the discussion on the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the discussion of Nadab and Abihu. I deleted the “What If I'm Wrong” discussion as redundant. I've deleted some footnotes as unnecessary and moved others into the main text, to simplify reading.

I've also deleted some arguments regarding baptism, as this topic is now better covered in *Born of Water*, available at <http://oneinjesus.info/born-of-water/>. Just so, the discussion of Galatians is rewritten because the issue is considered in depth in *Do We Teach Another Gospel?* available at <http://oneinjesus.info/do-we-teach-another-gospel/>.

I've also slightly rewritten the discussion of what it means to be “controlled by the Spirit” as the NIV says in Romans 8. This language in the NIV has received some criticism, and I felt compelled to be a bit plainer in how this should be understood.

I've not tried to update this for the most current disputes in the Churches of Christ, but then things haven't changed that much in the last 15 years. We're still arguing about pretty much the same things.

Preface (Original)

The Churches of Christ are rapidly heading toward another major division. Unlike previous divisions, this division does not center around one or two issues so much as many loosely related challenges to many of our traditions and doctrines—the role of women in the church, divorce and remarriage, the conduct of the assembly, the organization of the local congregation, the “new hermeneutic,” and many more. Unfortunately, while I have read some truly excellent books and articles that deal with many of these issues, very few have gone into depth as to the larger scriptural principles involved.

You see, each division involves at least two disagreements: (1) the question that we are arguing about and (2) whether we must divide if we disagree about (1). We spend our energies on the first item and too frequently ignore the second. Therefore, we have more or less arbitrarily come to accept some disagreements as not requiring a division but insist on division as to other disagreements. Churches split over whether to have a kitchen in the building but not over whether the Holy Spirit indwells. In some towns, we split over divorce and remarriage issues. Some tolerate disagreement over evolution, but many do not. We tolerate those who disagree with us on the wearing of hats and mixed swimming, but not speaking in tongues or the role of women in the church.

Within the Churches of Christ, we have had, and continue to have, many areas of disagreement—instrumental music, missionary societies, the clothes to wear to church, full-time ministers, church organization, “total commitment,” Pentecostalism, pre-millennialism, the “Boston Movement,” the “Crossroads Movement,” the children’s church, use of mass media, campus ministries and Bible chairs, conscientious objector status, voting and otherwise participating in civil government, cooperation with other congregations, and much more. We will always disagree over the interpretation of scripture. We have nearly 2,000 years of history to prove it, as well as over 150 years of disagreements within even our own Restoration Movement. During the First Century, even the divinely inspired apostles and all the miracles done didn’t prevent such disagreements!

Therefore, the solution to division will not be found in coming to an agreement on all the issues that so divide us. I wish that it were otherwise, but it is not. Rather, the solution to division within the Church must be found in how we decide whether to divide and split churches when we have the disagreements that are so inevitable. And I believe that the Bible speaks to this very need. This is why I have written this book.

We need to change our understanding of the scriptures in some very basic ways. Certainly, much of what we in the Churches of Christ have traditionally taught and believed over the years is true and sound. But the Bible condemns division and commands unity. Therefore, there must be something fundamentally wrong that causes us to split and split again. Moreover, the bitterness and cruelty of the attacks leveled by many of our warring factions against the others is another symptom of something badly amiss. We should be fighting Satan in order to extend the borders of God’s kingdom, and yet we often launch our most vigorous assaults against our fellow Christians.

It is amazing and downright embarrassing that a group of believers in Jesus, with one Lord, one Bible, and nearly everything in common, including over 150 years of common history and beliefs, could be on the verge of division—again, but all the signs point to another major realignment. Surely, God has provided solutions to the problems that so plague the Churches of Christ.

Prologue

Good morning, class.

The scene is a Sunday School class for college students. The teacher observes his students as they slowly drag themselves into the room. Clearly, many had been out late Saturday night. The girls were well dressed but very sleepy, having gotten up early to get their hair and makeup just right before coming to church. The boys were just sleepy. Some even came to class with their hair still wet from their wake-up showers.

This is the beginning of a new semester, and we'll be studying The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace.

A few students look up. "Would you repeat that?"

The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace. This is going to be a different sort of course. Our only text will be the Bible, but we'll be jumping around from book to book a lot. Get ready for some real "Bible drills."

The lessons will be in two parts. First we'll cover the basics of the Holy Spirit. Once we've gotten a foundation laid, we'll talk about grace. Then we'll draw some conclusions. It will take a few months, but we'll cover a lot of ground very fast.

By the way, we're going to be studying the Holy Spirit to help us understand God's grace. We are not going to be talking about Pentecostalism, faith healing, or that sort of thing. These are very important topics, but we want to learn what the Bible really teaches about the Spirit, not what it doesn't teach. All too often, we have run into difficult verses in our Bible classes and have dealt with them by deciding what the verses don't say. We read about predestination in the Bible, and we go to great lengths to prove the traditionally Calvinist churches wrong as to their understanding of it. But we forget that God put that verse in the Bible for all of us to profit from, and so we haven't understood the verse until we figure out what it does say.

Most of the class is now fully awake. They realize that this will not be an ordinary class. They'll either learn something or else get to hear some rip-roaring arguments.

Just so, when we study the Holy Spirit and grace, we will not spend a lot of time talking about what other people teach or how these verses might be misinterpreted. We won't talk much about how these issues have been interpreted throughout history. I've taught that material before, and we can learn much from our history. But this time I don't want to get distracted by side issues. The critical question is: What does the Bible say?

We are also going to study how God's grace relates to some very practical concerns. The materials that we will be studying over the next few months are not just abstract principles. We in the Churches of Christ have a serious problem with division, and we will be looking deeply into God's Word to see how God says that we should deal with this problem.

How many of you have attended a congregation that has split or that resulted from a split?

Hands shoot up all over the classroom. Someone in the back makes a long whistle, as the class registers dismay at how many splits there have been.

How many grew up in a town where at least one Church of Christ split at some time.

Virtually every hand goes up this time. The class's amazement becomes embarrassment.

Let me get a few of you to tell us why the Church in your town split.

One girl volunteers: "My congregation split over orphans homes back in the 50's. We are still fighting with the anti's in town over this, even though we dropped the orphanage from our budget 10 years ago. Sometimes I think that we spend half of our sermons defending our position on this issue."

Another student offers, "We split just a couple of years ago when the elders accepted a divorced and remarried couple that had been baptized after the second marriage. Half the congregation walked out of the building, and we had just built a new building and had a big bond issue to pay off?"

A third student says, "We split over the Pentecostal movement back in the 60's. About 10 families left to start their own church so they could speak in tongues."

A number of other examples are given. No one is very proud of the divisions, and many of the class members are plainly angry about the splits. Clearly, this is an emotional issue, but few class members realized that many others were so resentful of the division until they saw the reactions of their classmates.

"I'm sick and tired of every Church of Christ being too small to be effective. We split and split until the churches that are left can barely afford to open the doors, much less have any kind of an effective ministry!" one student concludes.

"Yeah, why do we always have to split a church whenever we disagree?" another student asks.

You've put your finger on precisely the right question. Turn with me to Amos 3:3. The teacher reads from the King James Version: "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?"

Doesn't this mean that we have to agree in order to walk together, and therefore, we can't be a part of the same congregation if we disagree?

"Well, nobody can agree on everything," suggests a girl on the front row.

Well, since this verse is in the Bible, maybe this means we must agree on everything in the Bible?

The students mull this one over. One of the older boys comments, "Let's be realistic. We don't even agree on what the Bible says. I know from talking with my friends here that some believe in an actual indwelling of the Spirit, and some do not. Some believe that God made the world through evolution, but many say the world is only 6,000 years old. A few of us oppose having a kitchen in the building. We disagree about lots of things, but it hasn't kept us from worshipping God together, or working together in the benevolence program, or going on mission campaigns together."

Many other students nod their heads vigorously. A nerve has clearly been touched.

Well, then, we must agree on some things, or can we just "agree to disagree" on everything? What do we have to agree on?

The class is slow to respond. "We have to believe in Jesus!" one student exclaims.

Absolutely right. What else?

The class is lost in thought.

What if someone is a Pentecostal? Can we accept a baptized believer who speaks in tongues? Do we have to agree on the works of the Spirit?

Immediately, several students scrunch up their noses and say that such a believer cannot be accepted. "Speaking in tongues is just too weird!" one says.

Well, can we accept someone who is wrong on whether the Spirit indwells?

"We do it every day!" a student exclaims.

The class is now thoroughly perplexed. They have never heard these questions squarely asked before and they have no idea where to go for an answer.

Isn't this just another way of asking how broad is God's grace? I mean, if God forgives someone for his false beliefs, then we must accept that person also, right? How can we be less forgiving than God?

The class agrees, but the members clearly have reservations about this idea.

A student asks, "But when does someone fall from grace? What false doctrines make you fall?"

We are going to spend the next few months answering that very question. But remember these things:

1. *God saves people, not "churches." The test for whether you are saved is (1) whether you have gotten into grace by being saved and (2) whether you have fallen away. If you've been saved and haven't fallen away, you are a Christian and you are in God's family, that is, his church. Your fellow Christians must recognize you as a fellow Christian and fellow*

church member. You may be in error on some point or other, but you are saved if you haven't fallen away.

2. *Being saved means hearing, believing, confessing, repenting, and being baptized. Grace only covers the sins of those in grace. You get into grace by being saved. We can never "agree to disagree" about how to be saved in the first place.*

3. *God's grace never excuses or justifies sin. It forgives sin. Just because we conclude that your brother or sister is forgiven for his or her false beliefs, that doesn't mean that we stop teaching what we believe to be true or that we can act contrary to our own understanding of this Bible. Neither is his or her sin "okay." It's wrong, and we cannot consider it to be anything else. But God didn't appoint you or me to pick and choose and say which sins put you outside grace and which do not. We must look to the Bible to see where to draw the line.*

With these thoughts in mind, next week we are going to begin a study of the Holy Spirit. This will give us enough common ground so that we can intelligently discuss God's grace. One reason that we understand grace so poorly is that we understand the Spirit poorly. When we've come to an agreement on the role of the Spirit, grace will be much easier to understand and to agree on.

We will then study God's grace in depth, and use our studies to help us deal with this problem of divisions and splits.

Chapter 1 Background

The Churches of Christ have a serious problem with division, and we've had this problem for a long time. The controversies that are brewing today are merely symptoms of much deeper problems that are of very longstanding. Ultimately, these problems must come from a misunderstanding of the Bible and God's will for us. Nonetheless, we can gain helpful insights into our situation by reviewing the history of our movement. Why are we the way we are?

In the early 1800's, a number of religious movements developed in the American frontier, which then consisted of such "western" states as Kentucky and Illinois. Among these was a movement led by a former Presbyterian minister, Barton W. Stone. Stone came to reject the strict Calvinism¹ of 19th Century Presbyterianism as well as the constant division of the Presbyterian churches over doctrines and opinions. Stone called for Christians to give up their denominational ties and become Christians only. Differences of opinion would be tolerated among church members so long as the members professed faith in Jesus and evidenced their salvation by living the Christian lifestyle. Stone was a strong believer in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He felt that the one true test of salvation is whether the Holy Spirit has been received by the believer as evidenced by Christian living.

Shortly after Stone began his work, a similar movement was founded by Thomas Campbell and his son, Alexander, who worked unaware of Stone's efforts. Thomas Campbell was also a former Presbyterian minister who had also come to reject Calvinism and the divisive attitudes prevalent in the Presbyterian Church of the day.

Alexander soon became the intellectual champion of this movement and developed a national reputation for his debates on religious issues. He came to the conclusion that baptism by immersion was essential to salvation. Thus, Campbell emphasized baptism as the true test of whether a believer has been saved. Campbell believed, however, that a penitent believer who, out of ignorance, had not been baptized would be saved. Stone shared this view.

These conclusions caused Campbell to cooperate with Baptist churches. The Baptists, like Campbell, taught and still teach that baptism is to be administered only to believers and, therefore, not to infants. Moreover, like Campbell, they teach that "baptism" in the Bible means immersion and do not consider sprinkling or pouring to constitute baptism in the Biblical sense.

¹ I will often footnote terms and references that might not be clear to someone unfamiliar with the Churches of Christ or religious jargon.

Calvinism is an elaborate system of Christian doctrine first taught by John Calvin. Calvin was a founder of the Reformed Churches. One of his followers, John Knox, founded the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, based on Calvin's teachings. Calvin taught that before God created the earth he "predestined" those who would be saved and those who would be lost. Only those chosen by God can accept God's salvation. Once a predestined person is called by God to be saved, he has no choice but to accept God's election of him, and he will then never fall from grace.

However, Campbell disagreed with the Baptists on a number of issues, and eventually the Baptists refused fellowship² to Campbell and his followers.

The Stone and Campbell movements soon overlapped territories, with many towns having congregations of both persuasions. Many within the Stone movement became persuaded as to Campbell's beliefs regarding baptism, and soon efforts were being made to unite the congregations into a common fellowship.

Campbell was initially reluctant to condone a merger. However, the churches were eager to merge, and many merged without his blessings. Because both movements also stressed that each church is completely independent (congregational autonomy), neither leader had any authority to prohibit or compel a merger of the movements. But eventually the two men came to recommend the merger gladly. The combined movements came to be known as the Restoration Movement. Today, scholars usually refer to the "Stone-Campbell Movement," as there are other denominations that were founded in an effort to restore First Century Christian.

Among the issues that had concerned Stone and Campbell was the differing emphasis on the Holy Spirit by the two movements. The Stone movement emphasized each Christian's relationship with the Spirit. But Campbell was clearly uncomfortable with the non-rational nature of the indwelling. Campbell emphasized that the Spirit did not provide any revelation other than through the Word³ of God as revealed through scripture. Campbell thus saw the Spirit as working exclusively through the Bible, denying any supernatural agency separate from the Bible.

The leaders also disagreed on the name of the church (Christian Church vs. Disciples of Christ) and the name of the members (Christians or Disciples). Stone rejected the usual statement of the nature of the trinity (God in three persons, but one essence) found in the Nicene Creed and seemed to many to be a Unitarian (God in one person). Campbell held premillennialist views (Christ will return and reign for 1,000 years). They disagreed on the nature of the atonement (how man is saved) and the necessity for ordained ministers. These and other more subtle differences were put aside, with the men agreeing to "think and let think" and to preach and write only on those subjects that would edify the church. Although each was the publisher of a periodical that was highly influential in the Movement, in the interest of unity each chose to avoid the temptation toward controversies over theological speculation.

When the merger was approved by the leaders of the two movements, a large portion of the Stone movement, perhaps more than half, refused to go along. These churches refused to accept Campbell's insistence on baptism as essential to salvation and his minimization of the role of the Spirit.

² In the Church of Christ tradition (as well as many others), "fellowship" can mean to enjoy the society of someone (for example, a fellowship dinner) or to recognize and treat someone as a fellow Christian. In this book, the latter use is normally the one intended.

³ "Word" when capitalized refers to God's word, which is the message of God to man communicated through the Bible (scripture) and through Jesus himself.

The combined movement, known most commonly as the Disciples of Christ or Christian Church in the North and as the Churches of Christ in the South, was greatly invigorated by the merger and spread rapidly throughout the country as the young nation expanded westward and into the Deep South.

Unlike most denominations, the movement did not divide over slavery during the Civil War. Following the war, while the northern churches were prospering, the southern churches remained relatively poor due to the losses caused by the Civil War, Reconstruction, and related factors.

By 1900 many of the northern churches had begun to build elaborate church buildings and use organs and pianos. Very few Protestant churches had the benefit of either before the Civil War, because the frontier cities were small and instruments were expensive. Moreover, most of the Protestant churches had long histories of rejecting the use of instruments in congregational worship. (In fact, Huldreich Zwingli, among the earliest leaders of the Reformation, rejected congregational singing as well as the instrument, believing the Bible taught Christians to make music in their hearts—only. Martin Luther personally opposed the use of instruments but felt that the Bible did not bind a prohibition and refuse to approve insistence on First Century practices.)

The wealth and size of the northern cities allowed the northern Restoration churches to afford not only buildings and instruments, but also nice clothes for Sunday attendance and full-time preachers. Alexander Campbell was a scathing critic of dressing up for church!⁴

Moreover, many of the northern churches organized a national missionary society to solicit funds and support foreign missions. A national missionary society had been begun before the Civil War and had been strongly supported by Campbell himself. Campbell had been elected president of this society, but he was too infirm from age to actively serve in this capacity. The opponents of the society claimed that Campbell's support was the result of infirmity due to his old age and that the young Alexander Campbell would never have supported such an innovation. However, Campbell plainly supported the founding of this institution.

In the late 19th Century, the *Gospel Advocate*, published in Nashville, Tennessee, became the most influential periodical among the southern churches. For many years, David Lipscomb served as its editor, and his writings have a tremendous impact on the southern churches even today. Under Lipscomb, the *Advocate* stoutly rejected the instrument and missionary societies, and the southern churches followed its lead.

The southern churches and not a few of the northern churches found these changes to be unscriptural as adding elements to the worship not authorized by scripture (instrumental music), as wasteful of God's resources (elaborate church buildings and Sunday finery), or as creating institutions to do the work that the Bible contemplated would be done by local churches (missionary societies). Because both branches of the Restoration Movement insisted on

⁴ "Worshipping Assemblies—No. I," *Millennial Harbinger* (1839), reprinted in John Allen Hudson, editor, *The Pioneers on Worship* (The Old Paths Book Club, 1947).

congregational autonomy, neither group could formally “join” or “leave” the Restoration Movement.

By the turn of the century, the division was very real in the minds of most churches. In 1906 the *Advocate* advised the Census Bureau that the Churches of Christ (as most southern churches were known) were no longer affiliated with the instrumentalist churches and should be considered a separate denomination. This decision formalized what was already largely an accomplished fact.

Just before the “formal” split, the Restoration Movement had some 1,600,000 members and was one of the largest Christian organizations within the United States. Between 150,000 and 300,000 of these were members of non-instrumental churches.

Many within the instrumentalist Disciples of Christ came under the influence of liberalism in the early 20th Century. Liberalism is the view that the Bible is not inspired, that Jesus was not a real person, but an ideal, and that most of the Bible is not historical.⁵ This view came to dominate most mainline denominations in the early 20th Century, and still carries a great deal, of influence within many of the older Protestant Churches. This thinking eventually led the Disciples to divide into the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) (which has a denominational structure, does not require baptism, and while not formally liberal, accepts those of liberal beliefs) and the conservative independent Christian (which is very similar to the Churches of Christ except for the use of the instrument and, in many cases, missionary societies).

Until about World War I, the *Gospel Advocate* counseled a broad view of fellowship, teaching that the Baptists’ practice of baptism to obey God (as opposed to the Churches of Christ’s teaching that baptism is for remission of sins), although reflecting an erroneous understanding of baptism, is sufficient to save. The *Firm Foundation* was founded in Texas to oppose this teaching. However, sometime after World War I, the *Advocate* came to teach that only those churches that followed the Biblical patterns of worship (meaning the assembly) and congregational organization were a part of the true church of Christ,⁶ and that those churches that use an instrument, join missionary societies, or the like do not bear the “marks” of the true church, are not the true church, and are not saved.

Under this line of reasoning, many churches sought to assure their salvation by taking great pains to do nothing not specifically authorized in the scriptures. After all, any “going beyond that which is written” (1 Cor. 4:6) would cost them their very souls! Thus, at various times some churches chose to reject the following as unauthorized:

- Paid preachers (as being equivalent to a single elder, when the Bible requires a plurality of elders).

⁵ We greatly abuse the term “liberal” when we use it to refer to someone to disagrees with us on what is sinful or how to interpret the scriptures. This is not what the term means, and our persistent misuse of it is slander of the worst kind. No one is a liberal unless he disputes the inspiration of scripture and the incarnation and historicity of Jesus.

⁶ In this book, the “church of Christ” with a little “c” refers to all Christians, whether or not formally affiliated with the Church of Christ.

- Use of multiple communion cups (Jesus only used one; single cup promotes unity).
- Use of song books (not found in the Bible).
- Sunday School (a denominational practice not used by anyone until the 19th Century, not found in the Bible, and contrary to the Biblical example of teaching all church members in a single class).
- Christian colleges (the local church is the only scriptural educational institution).
- Sunday School literature other than the Bible (they didn't use lesson books or flannel graphs in the New Testament).

Many churches divided over these and similar issues. It was felt that division was better than “condoning” sin by staying together with those who insisted on participating in unauthorized practices. Those who objected to a practice were called “anti’s” by those who approved the practice. Those who opposed a practice called those favoring the practice “digressives” or “liberals.”

The experience of the Disciples of Christ with actual liberalism was well known. Influential periodicals argued that those who disagreed with a more conservative view could not disagree for Biblical reasons, since the arguments made by the conservative must be obvious to even the densest of readers. Therefore, those who disagree must do so by doubting the truth of what the Bible so plainly says on the subject. Therefore, all who disagree are liberals. And all liberals are going to hell. Thus, although the Churches of Christ had no denominational organization or structure, the editors of Church periodicals became de facto archbishops, with the power to excommunicate those who dared disagree with a stroke of a venomous pen.

During the 1930's, a concerted effort was made to re-unite the instrumentalist independent Christian Churches with the non-instrumentalist Churches of Christ. These efforts were led by Claude E Witty, of the Westside Central Church of Christ in Detroit, and James DeForest Murch, of the independent Christian Church.⁷ The issues that the participants considered to be the basis of division were: instrumental music, missionary societies and similar organizations, the organized Sunday School, the pastor system, raising money by giving suppers, choirs, solos, and similar special singing, and the name of the church.

A number of “unity meetings” were held seeking a reconciliation of the two branches of the Restoration Movement. The largest of all the unity meetings was planned to be held in Detroit—the “big meeting”—in an effort to bring the reconciliation efforts to a head. The *Gospel Advocate* published articles by Witty and also articles by those who opposed the unity efforts. Typical of those opposing the efforts is an article by W. E. Brightwell, stating,

⁷ The material in this chapter on the Church in the 1930's is derived largely from Bert Thompson's tract, *Non-Denominational Christianity: Is Unity Possible?* However, the conclusions drawn from these events are strictly my own.

Did it ever occur to you, Brother Witty, that with the same amount of sacrifice of convictions necessary to unite with the Christian Church we can fellowship every sect on earth that acknowledges the name of Christ?⁸

In preparation for the big meeting, invitations to prominent church leaders were sent out. H. Leo Boles, the editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, was chosen to give the keynote address for the Churches of Christ. Boles spoke to the assembled men and women of the Christian Church who had traveled to the meeting to seek unity in Christ, and said,

You know where you left the Churches of Christ; hence you know where to find them; come back and unity is the inevitable result. There will be no compromise or surrender on this point. The Churches of Christ, as long as they are loyal to the New Testament, cannot compromise on this or any other point so clearly taught in the New Testament.

The Witty/Murch unity effort soon collapsed.

After World War 2, the South began to prosper, due to the benefits of the military experience, education becoming available under the G.I. Bill, the development of the South under such Roosevelt programs as the Rural Electrification Authority, and perhaps most importantly, the invention of air conditioning. At the same time, the Churches of Christ grew rapidly and probably caught up with the instrumentalist branch of the Movement (exact membership data is impossible to get).

The dramatic changes in American society and the entire world following World War II made many Americans open to Christianity. The Churches began a number of important initiatives, including the establishment of orphans homes (especially needed following World War II and the Korean War) and the “Herald of Truth,” a national television show sponsored cooperatively by many members and congregations of the Churches of Christ.

Many churches came to believe that orphans homes and television programs could not be supported from church funds (since these were not works of a local congregation but of distinct institutions). Soon countless congregations had divided over these very emotional issues.

During the 1950’s another unity effort was made, with the primary focus being to cause the two sides of the orphans home and “Herald of Truth” dispute to recognize one another as brothers and cooperate. This effort was lead by W. Carl Ketcherside of St. Louis, who was anti-cooperative, anti-Christian college, and anti-fulltime preacher. Although the cooperatives have since largely come to accept the salvation of the anti-cooperatives, during the 1950’s, when emotions were high, both sides tended to consider the other lost in sin for its false teaching, both sides seeing no distinction between the anti-cooperative controversy and the instrumental and missionary society disputes. Ketcherside’s efforts were rejected by the Churches of Christ as a whole, so much so that even today many preachers opposing unity efforts conclude their published articles by branding their opponents guilty of “Ketcherside-ism.”

⁸ “He That Is Not For Me,” *Gospel Advocate* (February 17, 1938).

In 1976 Monroe E. Hawley's *Redigging the Wells* was published,⁹ sounding similar themes to Witty and Ketcherside:

However, many do not realize that God also extends his grace to doctrinal matters. Some reason that when doctrinal error is persisted in there is no repentance displayed and without repentance there can be no forgiveness. This betrays a misconception of the nature of repentance. ... One cannot repent of what he does not know to be wrong. ... Likewise, many honest people persist in doctrinal error because they have never learned that it is error. If they were convinced they were wrong, they would change. Who has the right to avow how far the Lord will or will not go in extending clemency to his children in either moral or doctrinal error?

Many members of the Churches of Christ became persuaded of the soundness of Hawley's arguments through his writings (Ketcherside's writings did not receive wide circulation among the cooperative churches), but at least in the South, his views were distinctly a minority position until recently.

During the 1970's and 1980's, under the editorship of Reuel Lemmons, the *Firm Foundation* began publishing articles along the same lines as Hawley's views, and thus the Texas and other western churches (where the *Firm Foundation* had the greatest influence) became much more likely to agree with the "unity" position. In the South, where the *Gospel Advocate* continued to be the trend-setting publication, very few congregations accepted these views, but rather the narrower view of grace was still considered not only sound, but unquestioned. Very few southern Church of Christ members were even aware that there had been or continued to be any controversy, because the ongoing efforts toward a reunification of the Restoration Movement were largely ignored by church periodicals widely read within the southern churches.

Thus, Rubel Shelly's publication of *I Just Want to be a Christian* in 1984 was a major event in the South but less so out west. Shelly had been a respected preacher and author for many years and was considered very conservative in his views. His "soundness" was beyond question. Some even considered him to be something of a legalist. However, this book placed him squarely in the Witty/Ketcherside/Hawley camp and did so in a manner that could not be ignored. Shelly wrote,

The universal church of God is made up of individuals—not groups, parts of groups, subsets within larger units, etc.—who have turned from Satan to God, from error to truth, from evil to righteousness. Specifically, it is made up of every person who has been born anew of the water and the Spirit. ...

[A Christian] breaks his or her fellowship with the body by embracing a doctrine which denies one or more of the essential elements of the Christian faith. These "essential elements" are the fundamental issues

⁹ Published by Quality Publications, Abilene, Texas.

identified by Paul in his famous unity passage of Ephesians 4:4-6. Having these seven things in common, Christians really are in partnership with one another in spiritual things.

The unity question had been swept under the rug in the South for many years, but now the issue became very public indeed. Many who had harbored views similar to Shelly's were emboldened to take more public stands, and the issue struck a responsive chord among many members other than preachers and intellectuals. The controversy continues today, with the issues being debated vigorously and, at times viciously.

From 1980 until 2006, the Churches of Christ grew 2.6% (total, *not* per year). This is all the more remarkable in light of the fact that sociologists and church growth experts have determined that people are most receptive to the gospel or a change in church affiliation during times of change, and these have been three decades of great change. During this same time, the Baptist, Pentecostal, independent Christian Churches, and Mormon churches have grown greatly, as have many other fundamentalist churches.

Moreover, thousands have left the traditional "mainline" churches, such as the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches, to form independent congregations, each seeking to restore New Testament Christianity as well as they know how. Never has the United States been more receptive to the historic plea of the Churches of Christ that Christians come out of the denominations and be Christians only. But we have been too busy fighting among ourselves to be effective in letting the world know what we stand for. We aren't even sure ourselves.

By the 1970's, many in the "mainline" Churches of Christ, those that reject missionary societies and instruments but accept congregational cooperation, congregational support of orphans homes and missions, Christian colleges, full-time ministers, and Sunday Schools, had begun a fresh study of the Holy Spirit and the doctrine of grace, driven in large part, I believe, by the loss of members to Pentecostal churches and concern over the lack of evangelical zeal within the Churches of Christ, as well as the increasing availability of modern-English translations. The new translations and continually increasing educational standards made church members much less reliant on preachers and editors for interpretation of scripture.

The mainline Churches of Christ now appear headed for another split. Some would say that the split has already occurred. Many churches still follow the narrower view of grace promoted by the *Gospel Advocate*. Others wish to take a much freer interpretation of God's grace and come closer to the views of Stone and Campbell. Both accuse the other of basing their views on emotion (an alleged unhealthy attachment to the past versus an alleged undisciplined, false concept of "love"). Those pursuing a broader view of grace have sometimes been guilty of "cheap grace," the notion that grace allows Christians to be lazy and uncommitted to Jesus, since God's grace will supposedly cover this sin. The conservatives' fear of being wrong often closes their minds to persuasion. Moreover, since the conservatives often believe that any error at all will lead to damnation, the less conservative teachings of the others are considered by them to be not only wrong but extremely dangerous.

This perception of both danger and error is driving the Churches toward a split that may be irrevocable. Once the two sides divide and, therefore, stop talking, there will be little chance for either side to learn from the other or to reconcile.

After all, there has never been a doctrinal split within the Churches that has later been healed. We still have no-Sunday School congregations, anti-cooperative congregations, one cup congregations, foot washing congregations, and holy kiss congregations.

While I was finishing work on this book, a congregation near my home town split over exactly these issues. The preacher implied in a sermon that the Baptists are saved. One side chose to follow the preacher while the other side declared their intention to be a “mainstream Church of Christ.” They evidently concluded that they could not meet as one church of our Lord while they disagreed over this matter.

Jesus tells us that a house divided against itself cannot stand. He was referring to Satan and his demons, but he could just as well have been referring to the Church of Christ today. We are divided against ourselves if anyone ever has been, and our fate has been prophesied if we do nothing about it!¹⁰

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the Restoration Movement split over instrumental music and missionary societies? What caused the two sides to reach different conclusions from the same scriptures and with a common history of Bible interpretation?
2. Is it possible for all those within the Restoration Movement to agree on all Biblical issues? Could all members of the “mainline” Churches of Christ ever agree on all Biblical issues?
3. If we can’t all agree, what determines whether a church must split when its members disagree and can’t come to an agreement? Are there some issues that we must agree on? Are there some that we can agree to disagree about?
4. How can the excessive influence of the editors of church periodicals be remedied?
5. How can the various divisions within the Churches of Christ and the Restoration Movement be healed?
6. Would God’s kingdom be better off if these divisions were healed? Why or why not?

¹⁰ For more study regarding the history of the Restoration Movement, especially as it involves the issues discussed in this book, I suggest the following: J. M. Powell, *This Cause We Plead* (20th Century Christian, Nashville, Tennessee 1987); C. Leonard Allen, *Distant Voices* (ACU Press, Abilene, Texas 1993); C. Leonard Allen and Richard T. Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots* (ACU Press, Abilene, Texas 1988); Earl L West, *In Search of the Ancient Order* vols. 1-4 (Religious Book Service 1950-1979, Religious Book Service 1987); James DeForest Murch, *Christians Only* (Standard Publishing Co., Cincinnati, Ohio 1962).

Chapter 2

The Holy Spirit's Indwelling

I attended a major Church of Christ-affiliated college. One reason I chose a church school was to learn about the Holy Spirit. At that age I figured that I knew just about all the Bible that there was to know, but the Holy Spirit continued to trouble me. The Pentecostal movement was in fun swing at the time, and many Churches of Christ had split over the issue. I was sure that this fine school would be the place to learn the answers.

Early on, I signed up for a class in 1 and 2 Corinthians. The professor had a long and respected pedigree within the Churches, and I was anxious to learn about the Spirit's gifts, a major theme of 1 Corinthians 14.

Some weeks later we finally got to chapter 14. We were ready to learn what the Bible says about tongues, prophecy, interpretation, and such. These were all timely and much-needed topics. The teacher approached the lectern bent low, as though burdened by the weight of great knowledge. He opened his Bible and turned to the chapter. He looked up, and with the utmost gravity announced, "1 Corinthians 14 is a very difficult chapter, and I have never really understood it, and I don't know anybody who does. We will skip it."

For a while, I attended a Sunday School class taught by a professor at my college. He was a very, very serious person. He was very dedicated to his teaching, but he just had no sense of humor.

We were studying James. Eventually we came to the passage that suggests that the sick of the congregation should ask the elders to pour oil on their heads to be healed. There were about ten minutes left in the class. He read the verse and saw two hands raised by two visitors.

The first visitor announced that he had had epilepsy and had been cured by exactly this procedure. The other visitor said that he had had severe diabetes and had also been cured this way. (Both visitors looked rather ill, in fact.) Our teacher opened his mouth to speak—and nothing came out. We waited and waited. After several minutes of silence, he dismissed class early.

This book is not really about the Holy Spirit; it is about grace. But I have learned from experience that grace cannot be thoroughly understood without first having an understanding of the Holy Spirit. The two subjects are completely intertwined, and a false understanding of the Holy Spirit will inevitably result in a false understanding of grace.

A number of excellent books on the Spirit have been published.¹ I will not try to replot the same ground. Moreover, the present book is not intended to deal with Pentecostalism, faith

¹ I believe that among the best are Harvey Floyd's *Is the Holy Spirit for Me?* (20th Century Christian, Nashville, TN 1981); Karl Brunner's *A Theology of the Holy Spirit: The Pentecostal Experience and the New Testament* [cont'd following page]

healing, speaking in tongues, and the like. Rather, I want to try to reach a consensus as to the *correct* understanding of the Spirit. We often spend time disproving the beliefs of others without taking time to ask what we should believe. Thus, the Churches of Christ as a whole have squarely rejected Pentecostalism but cannot even reach agreement as to whether the Holy Spirit indwells the Christian. I do not believe that the Spirit grants special revelation today, allows the performance of miracles (in the Biblical sense of a “wonder”), or empowers us to speak in tongues. But we must leave these questions for another day.

Many of those who believe the Spirit works only through the Word would say that the Spirit indwells all Christians, but they would mean that the Spirit indwells representatively through the Word. When others say the Holy Spirit indwells a Christian, they mean that the Holy Spirit has a special, personal, effective relationship with the individual Christian that does not exist for non-Christians. The relationship is realized and felt in the Christian’s heart and mind, and thus is an internal, intimate, life-changing relationship—an actual indwelling. We will see whether the Bible uses the term in the same sense. The question is fundamentally one of faith, and the only authority in this matter is the Bible.

A. The Spirit and the Word

Because many within the Churches of Christ believe the Holy Spirit only indwells Christians representatively, that is, through the Word, we must first consider the merit of this view. As we do so, we will often linger over a key passage to gain a deeper insight into the workings of God’s Spirit.

There have been a number of publications by the non-indwelling school of thought to the effect that the Holy Spirit and the Word must be the same since they do the same things. Lists have been compiled by which it is shown that the Bible attributes the same roles to the Word and the Spirit. Thus, it is argued, they are indistinguishable.

Let’s test this argument by reading a few passages. First, note this quote from John’s Gospel:

(John 14:16-17)² And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

Witness (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1970); and D. A. Carson’s *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co., 1987).

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible passages are quoted from the New International Version (NIV). “KJV” indicates the King James Version.

In these verses, Jesus tells his apostles that after his resurrection God will send the Holy Spirit. The Spirit³ will certainly not be given only to the apostles or the First Century Christians—the Spirit is to be given “forever.” Moreover, the coming Spirit will neither be seen nor known by the world.

Jesus is our Counselor, and the Spirit is another Counselor. The Greek word translated Counselor is the same word used for a defense attorney. It is literally “one who stands beside” to give comfort or counsel. Some translations call the Spirit the “Comforter.” And the word refers to a person, not a book. And Jesus himself speaks of sending “him,” not “it.”

Moreover, the Spirit that Jesus is to send forever can be seen and known by Christians but not non-Christians. How can this be a description of the Bible? Many lost people own and diligently study the Bible. Jesus says that only Christians possess and experience the indwelling of the Spirit.

B. John 3

John’s Gospel is an especially important source of information about the Holy Spirit. The coming of the Spirit is a major theme of this book. For example, when Jesus is approached by Nicodemus, Jesus tells him about the nature of the new birth:

(John 3:5-8) Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again: The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.’”

Jesus tells us that the Spirit gives birth to Spirit. The New International Version translators capitalized “Spirit” only in the first reference, but in the First Century, Greek was written entirely in capital letters. There was no difference in the capitalization in John’s own writing. Jesus’ parallel is that the Spirit gives birth to Spirit just as flesh gives birth to flesh. Those born of the flesh have the nature of the flesh. Those born of the Spirit have the nature of the Spirit.

When you are born again, you are born of the Spirit and you become a Spiritual being. The Spirit affects your very nature, just as being born of the flesh defined your nature as a fleshly being.

C. 2 Corinthians 3

Next, note this passage from 2 Corinthians:

³ I will consistently capitalize Spirit when I am referring to the Holy Spirit and Word when I am referring to the Word of God. Neither the New International Version of the Bible nor the King James Version always follow this capitalization, and so the quoted verses may follow different capitalization conventions.

(2 Cor. 3:3) You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

If the Spirit operates only through the Word, how can Paul say that the Corinthians are a letter written with the Spirit and “not with ink”?

(2 Cor. 3:4-6) Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Paul now goes much further and tells the Corinthians that there is a very big difference between God’s Word acting alone and God’s Spirit—the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. The new covenant, the gospel, is “of the Spirit,” and it is not “of the letter.”

For a Word-only Christian, this cannot make sense. Don’t even try to argue that Paul is talking about the special gifts of the Spirit discussed in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Paul says that *all* the Corinthians are written with the Spirit on tablets of the human heart. Certainly not all Corinthians had special gifts. After all, many Corinthians were surely added to the church long after Paul had left.⁴

D. John 4

So what does Paul mean? The answer is found in a surprising place, the story of the Samaritan woman.

(John 4:9-14) The Samaritan woman said to [Jesus], “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you **living water.**”

“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?”

⁴ Some believe that the special, miraculous gifts of the Spirit were given only by the laying on of the apostles’ hands, with the sole exceptions being the apostles themselves at Pentecost and Cornelius and his household. Others contend that such gifts occurred during the First Century simply as the Holy Spirit saw fit. Neither school of thought teaches that all the members of any congregation could perform miracles.

Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Jesus says that “living water” has four characteristics:

- Jesus gives it.
- Once you’ve received it, you never thirst for it again.
- It creates a “spring” within the recipient.
- This spring produces eternal life in the recipient.

He is not discussing salvation, but something that produces salvation from within the Christian. Jesus is discussing the indwelling Spirit. Any doubt on this point is resolved in John 7:

(John 7:37-39) On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” **By this he meant the Spirit**, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

John tells us that, when Jesus spoke of living water, he was speaking of the coming Spirit. Jesus prophesied that following his glorification (his return to heaven) the Spirit would be received by all who believe in him. The promise is to “anyone” who is thirsty, not just those on whom hands might be laid by an apostle. The promise is to “[w]hoever believes in me.” And the Holy Spirit “will flow from within” the believer.

Could Jesus have been speaking about the Word? Was the Word not received until Jesus was glorified? Do Christians receive the Word when they are saved? Don’t they “hear” the Word and receive it before they believe, and believe before they are saved? Jesus said that this Living Water would come to those who have already believed.

Could Jesus have been talking to the Samaritan woman about the Word? Does the Word flow from within the believer? Christians never thirst for Living Water because they already have it. Do you thirst for the Word? You should. We all need more knowledge of God’s Word and we are never filled. But once we have the Spirit, we need never receive it again.

This tells us what Paul meant in 2 Corinthians when he said that the Spirit gives life. The Holy Spirit is Living Water. This water “wells up” from within the Christian to give “eternal life” for which the Christian “will never thirst again.” The Spirit does indeed give life—eternal life. Moreover, this life giving occurs not just at baptism, but throughout the life of the Christian. Jesus gives his followers, not a drink of life-giving water, but a spring that never runs dry.

E. Romans 7 and 8

But 2 Corinthians not only tells us that the Spirit gives life, it also says that the “letter” kills. How can this be?

(Rom. 7:4-8) So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.” But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead.

Paul tells us that before we were saved, we were controlled by our sinful nature. Even though we knew and tried to obey God’s law, we failed. Moreover, the prohibitions themselves made the sins all the more tempting, and we sinned all the more. The result of our efforts was death. God’s revelation of his will for man through the law produced only frustration and more sin.

(Rom. 7:6) But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

The solution is not a better law. It is the Spirit. It’s not rules; it’s a relationship. This is explained in more detail in chapter 8:

(Rom. 8:1-2) Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

Paul draws a contrast between the new and old covenants. The old covenant is “sin and death.” The new covenant is “the Spirit of life” and “no condemnation.”

(Rom. 8:3-4) For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

If we live “according to the Spirit,” the requirements of the law are fully met in us. How do we live this way?

(Rom. 8:5) Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.

Living according to the Spirit is determined not so much by actions as by motivation. The test is whether you desire the things the Spirit desires. Obviously, you will frequently fail to achieve all that you desire, but you will suffer no condemnation for such failures.

(Rom. 8:6-7) The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

The Spiritual mind is at peace because it is submissive to God's will.

(Rom. 8:9a) You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you.

If the Spirit lives in you, you are controlled by the Spirit. If you are not controlled by the Spirit, he does not live in you!

We should pause for a moment to recognize that "controlled by" is not in the original Greek. Rather, the Greek is more literally "of the Spirit" or "the Spirit's." Nonetheless, more than one translation has found this translation appropriate.

The thought is not a loss of free will so much as influence. When I say to my wife, "I am yours," I mean that what matters to her matters to me. Her desires influence me—and do so profoundly. Just so, if we are the Spirit's people, we very much want to do what the Spirit wants.

(Rom. 8:9b) And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.

If you are not influenced by the Spirit, you do not have the Spirit, and if you do not have the Spirit, you do not belong to Christ. Either the Spirit lives in you and influences you, or you are damned! There are no other possibilities. There are no Christians (saved persons) who don't have the Spirit. There is no one who has the Spirit who is not saved.

(Rom. 8:10-11) But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

If the Spirit is living in you, you will be resurrected, just as Jesus was, "through his Spirit." You must have the Spirit to be resurrected, because your resurrection will be received only through the Spirit living in you. No one who has the Spirit will fail to be resurrected.

(Rom. 8:12-14) Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Being controlled or led by the Spirit means putting “to death the misdeeds of the body.” It simply means continuing in the repentance that allowed you to be saved in the first place. It means growing in Christ. It means being filled with the Spirit. It does not mean a loss of free will. *We* do the putting to death, but we do it *by* the Spirit. The Spirit encourages and empowers us, but ultimately we choose whether to follow the Spirit’s promptings.

(Rom. 8:15) For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba*,”⁵ Father.”

Christians need not be afraid of condemnation. It is a possibility of course, but for a growing, repenting Christian, the proper state of mind is life, peace, and a constant, comfortable, personal relationship with God.

(Rom. 8:16) The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.

The Spirit’s testimony is not through miraculous signs but through the mind of the saved. The fact that a Christian’s mind is led by the Spirit will be evident from his thoughts, motivations, words, and deeds, and his salvation will be assured.

(Rom. 8:26) In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

The Spirit not only gives life, but it makes up any deficiencies in our prayer life. We will study this chapter again.

F. The down payment

Three times Paul describes the indwelling as a seal, deposit, guaranty, or down payment.

(2 Cor. 1:21-22) Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

(2 Cor. 5:5) Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

(Eph. 1:13) And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit

The word translated “deposit” is a commercial term meaning a down payment or payment of earnest money. When you buy a car, you sign a note, promising to pay for the car in

⁵ Aramaic for “Daddy” or “Father.” Aramaic was the language spoken in Palestine in Jesus’ time and so is the native language of Jesus and the apostles.

the future, and you make a down payment, which is in cash. It would be a contradiction in terms and utter nonsense to sign a note for a down payment. A down payment is real and it is now.

God tells us that heaven is in our futures. This is God's "note." He says that he gives us the Spirit today as an immediate, first installment of our reward. The immediacy and reality of the Spirit give us confidence in the promises of God and assure us of his faithfulness. The Word is the promise. The Spirit is the cash in hand.

"Seal" is also a commercial term. Although seals have lost most of their legal significance in the United States, until recently a seal might be impressed on a legal document to make the promises contained in the document absolutely enforceable. No promise made under seal could be withdrawn or repudiated in court. This is much the same thought as in the term "guaranty." God gives his personal guaranty that we are saved!

But a seal also means ownership. In the First Century, goods were often sealed before shipping to prove their ownership. God is telling not only us, but the whole world, that we are his.

Moreover, a seal represented authority. In ancient times, the keeper of the king's seal could stamp documents with the seal, giving them the same authority as though the king himself signed them. In some regions, it has even been considered that you would be absolutely bound by a promise made under your seal even though the promise was made without your knowledge and sealed by someone who had stolen your seal!

God is telling us that he owns us, that the whole world can *see* his ownership, that he has authorized our salvation, and that we were saved by his authority.

Can God be talking about the Bible only? How can the Bible be a "seal"? Are Christians the only people who own and read Bibles? The seal is not the promise—it is the immediate, real assurance of the promise. The Bible makes the promise, and therefore cannot be the seal. The immediate, real, powerful, effective Spirit living and working in each of us is God's seal.

G. The Glory and the Spirit

This lesson begins on top of Mt. Sinai. Moses was called by God to the top of the mountain to receive the Law of Moses.

(Exo. 24:15-17) When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD⁶ settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain.

⁶ The New International Version uses 'LORD' in all capitals to refer to YAHWEH or Jehovah, the Jews' holiest name for God.

This is what the songs mean by “clouds of glory.” God’s glory is nothing so abstract as his greatness or divinity. It is the visible, radiant, consuming fire demonstrating a special, powerful presence of God himself.

Shortly thereafter, the Israelites built the tabernacle. The tabernacle was built during their wanderings in the wilderness on their way out of Egypt as something of a portable temple. The tabernacle was built in response to God’s command to Moses:

(Exo. 25:8) “Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.”

Although God is an omnipresent being, transcending all limitations of space and time, God wanted a building built for him to dwell in.

God again spoke to Moses and described how he would dwell within the tabernacle and how his presence would consecrate it:

(Exo. 29:42-43) “For the generations to come this burnt offering is to be made regularly at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting before the LORD. There I will meet you and speak to you; there also I will meet with the Israelites, and the place will be consecrated by my glory.”

“Glory” in Hebrew is *Shekinah*. When the tabernacle was finished, the *Shekinah* appeared.

(Exo. 40:33-35) Then Moses set up the courtyard around the tabernacle and altar and put up the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard. And so Moses finished the work. Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

Once again, we see the Glory as the bright, shining presence of God on earth. It was real and present, so real that Moses himself could not approach it.

Much later, God commanded Solomon to build a temple in Jerusalem on Mount Zion to replace the tabernacle. As was true for the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant was to rest in the Holy of Holies, or the Most Holy Place. When the temple was finished, the ark was brought in.

(1 Kings 8:6-12) The priests then brought the ark of the Lord’s covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim. The cherubim spread their wings over the place of the ark and overshadowed the ark and its carrying poles. ... When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple. Then Solomon said, “The LORD has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud ...”

The same phenomenon occurred for Solomon's temple as had occurred for Moses' tabernacle. The arrival of God's indwelling demonstrated God's acceptance of the house built for him and consecrated the dwelling as holy.

Although Solomon saw the real presence of God, he knew by inspiration that God was not limited to the confines of the Holy of Holies. He prayed at the temple dedication ceremony immediately after the Glory appeared,

(1 Kings 8:27) "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!"

Solomon did not deny that God dwelt in the temple, but he knew that this was not all of God.

Some years later, the Israelites had so fallen away from God that God permitted Nebuchadnezzar to conquer Jerusalem. He did not destroy the temple during his first conquest, but he took from Judah its brightest and most accomplished citizens. These men and women, such as Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, were taken to Babylon to be indoctrinated in the Babylonian way.

God called Ezekiel to prophesy to these exiles and called Jeremiah to prophesy to those left behind. Ezekiel prophesied that Nebuchadnezzar would again conquer a rebellious Jerusalem and that this time virtually all of Judea would be exiled to Babylon. Many Jews doubted that God would permit the destruction of his temple and dwelling place, but Ezekiel prophesied that God's Glory would reluctantly leave the temple, symbolizing God's rejection of the Jews. His highly symbolic language shows the Glory gradually withdrawing from the temple and Jerusalem, eventually resting on the Mount of Olives.

(Ezek. 9:3a) Now the glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple.

(Ezek. 10:4-5) Then the glory of the LORD rose from above the cherubim and moved to the threshold of the temple. The cloud filled the temple, and the court was full of the radiance of the glory of the LORD. The sound of the wings of the cherubim could be heard as far away as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks.

(Ezek. 10:18-19) Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim. While I watched, the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground, and as they went, the wheels went with them. They stopped at the entrance to the east gate of the Lord's house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.

(Ezek. 11:22-23) Then the cherubim, with the wheels beside them, spread their wings, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them. The glory of the LORD went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it.

Ezekiel next prophesied that one day the Glory would return to a new and better temple.

(Ezek. 43:3-7) The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown. The glory of the LORD entered the temple through the gate facing east. Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me from inside the temple. He said: "Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever."

However, history teaches us that when the Jews returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah and they rebuilt the temple, it was not filled with the Glory when it was dedicated. The Jews were greatly disturbed by this and anxiously awaited the coming of the Messiah, when they expected the Glory to return to God's people.

Under the new covenant, each Christian and each congregation is a temple.

(1 Cor. 3:16) Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?

(1 Cor. 6:19a) Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?

(Eph. 2:21-22) In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Moreover, you can see that it is not the Glory that dwells in the new temple, but the Spirit.

(Rom. 8:17-18) Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with **the glory that will be revealed in us.**

Paul says that each Christian has a "glory" within him that will be revealed at the end of time. Read all of Romans 8. The chapter is written to tell Christians about the indwelling of the Spirit, and this "Glory" clearly is the Spirit himself.

The identity of the Spirit and the Glory is made all the more evident in 1 Peter:

(1 Pet. 4:14) If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of Glory and of God rests on you.

This passage also recalls the tongues of fire that rested on the Apostles at Pentecost. The fire in Acts 2 suggests the Glory of the Old Testament.

This thought is given its fullest description in 2 Corinthians. Paul recalls that when Moses went to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, he was in the presence of God's Glory. He returned to the Israelite camp with a brightly shining face. He covered his face with a veil.

(2 Cor. 3:6-8) He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?

Both the old covenant and the new came with Glory. Paul shows that the Old Covenant is inferior because its Glory faded away.

(2 Cor. 3:9-11) If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

The Glory of the new covenant will never fade. Its Glory far exceeds the Glory of the old. Therefore, the new covenant is superior to the old.

(2 Cor. 3:12-13,18) Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. ... And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

We all participate in this Glory, and not only will our own Glory not fade, it will be "ever-increasing"! And both the Glory and the increase comes from the Lord, by means of the Spirit.

God inspired the authors of the Bible to tell us that the Holy Spirit today represents the Glory of the Old Testament. Moreover, our bodies represent the temple. And just as was true under the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit literally dwells in the modern-day temple. This is not symbolic or representational. It is as real and powerful as the coming of God's *Shekinah* at the dedications of the tabernacle and the temple.

God can dwell through his Glory both everywhere and especially in the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies is where the people were redeemed from their sins on the Day of Atonement. Thus, God had a special, powerful, redemptive, radiant presence in the temple. This is *not* inconsistent with his omnipresence. It *is* consistent with his omnipotence. And as a Christian

grows, he⁷ is increasingly filled with the Spirit, and God's Glory within him radiates all the more!

H. The Word and the Spirit

Many of those who have argued for the Word-only view have argued that their view is supported by the fact that many verses can be sensibly read by replacing "Spirit" with "Word." While there are certainly many verses where such a substitution can be made, the ability to make such substitutions only proves the point if all verses discussing the indwelling can have a substitution. After all, you could take a biography of George Washington and replace his name with "Thomas Jefferson" in a great many places with perfect good sense. But they are not the same person. And you could not make the substitution in every case.

Review these passages, from 2 Corinthians, John, and Romans. Try to replace "Spirit" with "Word" in each case. The results are absurd!

(2 Cor. 3:6) He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the **Bible**; for the letter kills, but the **Bible** gives life.

(John 7:37-39) On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the **Bible**, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the **Bible** had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

(Rom. 8:9,11) You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the **Bible**, if the **Bible** lives in you.... And if the **Bible** of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his **Bible**, who lives in you.

(Rom. 8:26) In the same way, the **Bible** helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the **Bible** himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

Sure there are some verses that make perfect sense when "Spirit" is replaced with "Bible." But there are very many verses dealing with the relationship of all Christians to God, Jesus, and the Spirit that will not permit this treatment. Sure there are many things that the Spirit does that the Word does, but there are many important things that the Spirit does that the Word does not and cannot do. The Word does not save. The Spirit saves. The Word instructs us about the mind of the Spirit, but the Word neither leads, intercedes, gives life, nor resurrects.

⁷ In my first draft I was careful to say "he or she" or "him or her" throughout the document to avoid any sexist implications. This approach proved to be unreadable. I have chosen, with some misgivings, to revert to the standard English use of "he" and "him" as gender-neutral, and no sexist implications are intended.

I. Prayer and the Spirit

The difficulties in understanding the Spirit are similar to those encountered in understanding prayer. But if your faith is strong enough for you to appreciate the power of prayer, then you should be able to appreciate the Spirit's power as well.

(Eph. 3:12,14-17a) In [Christ] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through **his Spirit in your inner being**, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

Paul's first prayer is that Christ would dwell in the Ephesians' hearts through faith. This was to be accomplished through the work of the Spirit in each Christian's inner being, acting with power:

(Eph. 3:17b-19) And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know **this love that surpasses knowledge**—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Paul then prays that Christians come to understand Christ's love shown through his grace by this same Spiritual power:

(Eph. 3:20-21) Now to him who is able to do **immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine**, according to his **power that is at work within us**, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

There is a power at work within all Christians—power through the Spirit in our inner beings. And the Spirit empowers us beyond all we ask or imagine.

If Paul is writing about the Word, then he is saying that we are to read the Bible and thereby learn about God's love. But why is Paul praying? If God and the Spirit do nothing, and if we come to our improved understanding through the power of diligent Bible study, we will learn the same regardless of prayer. And if prayer does have an effect, then God has empowered us through a means other than the Word!

If Paul is talking about the Word, then he is talking about something external to us that we should make internal through study. But he says that what we need is *already* in us. If we receive this power by learning from study, then how can we be empowered beyond all we ask or imagine? If it depends entirely on human effort, how can the working of the Spirit exceed human capabilities?

If I learn about God’s love exclusively from the Bible, how can it surpass knowledge? Under that theory, it’s only knowledge.

Paul says the same thing in Philippians:

(Phil. 4:7) And the peace of God, which **transcends all understanding**, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

How can we enjoy peace beyond our ability to understand if God only operates on our minds through our understanding? Why do we pray that God “guard, guide, and direct us”? Is this a scriptural prayer? How does God answer this prayer? Why pray that God give the preacher “a ready recollection” if God will not operate directly on his memory?

If God never operates directly on the heart of the Christian, then this guidance and direction must occur only through Bible study. If so, wouldn’t our prayer time be better spent reading our Bibles? After all, how can you believe that the prayer results in improved guidance and direction if God does nothing in response?

We in the Churches of Christ do not suppose that God grants a vision or verbatim prophecy in response to such a prayer. But we do believe that he empowers the Christian to be more open to his Word, to have a deeper, wider, and higher understanding of his revelation. And the empowerment is beyond the action of the Word itself—or else prayer means nothing.

When we pray that God heal a friend, we don’t think that our sick friend must read the Bible to be cured. If we ask God to guide the hands of the attending doctors, we don’t expect the doctors to read the Bible—we expect God to directly affect their hearts and minds to help them do a better job.

If God the Father can be active in history, help physicians heal our loved ones, improve our Bible study, and give preachers “a ready recollection”—all by direct operation on the hearts of people, why is there any problem with believing that sometimes God does these things through the agency of the Spirit?

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the fact that you are a temple for God’s Holy Spirit affect your relationship with God? How does it affect how you feel about God’s presence?
2. Compare your body to the Old Testament temple. What are the similarities that allow God to tell us that our bodies are temples?
3. Where do we worship God?
4. How is the presence of the Holy Spirit like the Glory that surrounds God in heaven?
5. How can your friends tell that God’s seal is on you?
6. How does the seal of the Spirit give you assurance of your salvation?

7. What makes living water “living”? Why is it like water?
8. How has John 4’s reference to living water been interpreted in your own experience? If the interpretations you’ve heard in the past differ than the one offered in the book, explain the justification for the contrary views.
9. How does the letter kill? Explain how the actions of the Spirit differ from the letter.

Chapter 3 The Spirit—Objections

In my home church, I attended a class on 1 John. When we neared the end of chapter 3, the teacher was clearly unwilling to go on to the last verse:

(1 John 3:24) Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

The next week I looked forward to studying this verse in depth, assuming the teacher had delayed getting to it to have a full class period available for the study. The following week he announced that we had left off at 1 John 4:1 (the next verse) and proceeded to teach. No one protested.

After class I asked him if he had intended to skip verse 24? He looked at me with a devious grin and said, “If you want verses like that covered, you teach this class!”

My brother tells me that while he was a very young child, his Sunday School teacher had him learn the following memory verse:

(Acts 2:38), Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, which is salvation.

It was years before he discovered that “which is salvation” is not in the Bible!

There are a number of other Word-only arguments, and at the risk of becoming tedious, I will deal briefly with the remaining ones most commonly made.

A. Symmetry

Some argue that if the Holy Spirit indwells a Christian and that God and Jesus do not, a Law of Symmetry is violated. This “law” is derived from the equality of the members of the Godhead. However, in any other context we readily see that the three members of the Godhead have different roles and characteristics.

Only Jesus was crucified. Only Jesus was born of a woman. Only Jesus sits at God’s right hand. Only Jesus is our high priest. God does not intercede for us. God did not inspire the Word (except through the Spirit). God did not descend on Jesus in the form of a dove. Only the Spirit hovered over the new creation when God made the heavens and the earth. Only Jesus is begotten of God. Jesus did not dwell in the Holy of Holies. If these obvious truths do not violate the “law,” then why should the Spirit’s indwelling?

It is also argued that there are several passages that state that God and Jesus indwell or live in the Christian, but these are speaking of an indirect indwelling accomplished through the Spirit. For example, John 14:23 states,

Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

But in the same chapter, Jesus explains how this is to be accomplished:

(John 14:16-17) "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you."

(John 14:25-26) "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

Other passages also explain how Jesus and God indwell us:

(Eph. 3:16-17a) I pray that out of his glorious riches [God] may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

Jesus' indwelling is empowered by the Spirit. Moreover, God's indwelling is through the Spirit as well:

(Rom. 5:5) And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

(1 John 4:12) No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

B. Omnipresence

It is also argued that all three members of the Godhead are always everywhere, that is, omnipresent. The question is posed: if the Spirit is everywhere, how can his indwelling have any special significance? After all, the Spirit is not only in me; he is in everything.

But we all know that Jesus existed for years in human form, in one special location. Members of the Godhead can be fully God and yet have a special local existence.

In Genesis we frequently read of God appearing in the form of a man. He walked in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:8) and he appeared to Abraham as a man (Gen. 18:1-33). God can have a special, local existence and still be fully God and fully omnipresent.

The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove (Matt. 3:16). He came upon the apostles with the appearance of tongues of fire (Acts 2:3). Some Christians had special gifts, but many did not. The Bible plainly teaches that the Spirit can have a special relationship with one person or appear at one place and still be fully a member of the Godhead and fully omnipresent.

Obviously, it is not only the presence of the Holy Spirit that matters. Rather, the special relationship and empowerment of the Holy Spirit are what make the indwelling significant.

C. Free will

Because of the Restoration Movement's roots in Presbyterianism (a Calvinist church) and frequent contacts and similarities with the Baptists (partially Calvinist), the Churches of Christ have always taken pains to distinguish their views from the Calvinist interpretations of the Bible. Not surprisingly, some are afraid that if the Holy Spirit has any influence on us, we would lose our free will—and we certainly wouldn't want anyone to think that we are Calvinists!

The Bible clearly teaches that we have freedom and free will. It also teaches that the Spirit "controls" (influences), "leads," "helps," and "empowers" us. How can these be reconciled?

(Phil. 2:12-13) Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

This verse does not mention the Holy Spirit but plainly refers to it. The Bible often tells us about God without using the word "God," and it tells us about the Holy Spirit sometimes without saying "Spirit." It is wrong to try to avoid finding the Holy Spirit except in the most undeniable passages. A true understanding of the Holy Spirit sheds light on many other doctrines and many passages not specifically speaking in Holy Spirit terms.

The quoted passage seems to contradict itself. It first says that each Christian is "to work out [his] salvation." The responsibility is clearly on the individual Christian. But then the Bible says that God himself works within each Christian so that the Christian wills (desires) what God wants him to desire and to act the way God wants him to act.

Which is it? Do I work out my own salvation? Or does God work within me to cause me to want to do and to do what is right? Obviously, both are true and there is really no contradiction. God does not take over my mind, but through his Spirit he influences my mind. And the more I try to do his will, the more effective his influence on me will be. The Spirit works in me, but I can grieve the Spirit (Eph. 4:30 KJV) and resist him (Acts 7:51). I can even quench him (1 Thes. 5:19 KJV). But if I try to put to death the misdeeds of the body, by trying to grow in Christ and being penitent, I open my heart to the Spirit's influence, and the Spirit will indeed guide, guard, and direct me—all the more if I pray for the Spirit's help—and I can pray for the Spirit's help without ever mentioning the Spirit..

D. How do I know?

Many who struggle with understanding the Holy Spirit ask how they can tell that the Spirit is in them? Since obvious manifestations, such as tongues of fire, languages, miracles, and the like no longer confirm the Spirit's coming, how do we know?

Clearly we are not to approach this question with a worldly mind or to test the Spirit by worldly means. 1 Corinthians teaches,

(1 Cor. 2:14-16) The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

If we judge the Bible's claims about the Holy Spirit by worldly standards, they will appear foolish. We must train ourselves to be Spiritual enough to see the powerful works of the Spirit through Spiritual eyes.

First, consider prayer. Have you ever had a relative or friend seriously ill, so ill that you were afraid of losing him? In such a case, have you prayed for God to help restore his health? If he got well, did you care how God did it? Or were you just pleased that God somehow took care of it?

We believe that God answers prayers, and when our loved ones are healed, we thank God for it. But no one knows how he does it, and no one can prove that he was involved. We know through faith and we know through experience that prayer is powerful. And we know because the Bible says so.

Just the same, the Holy Spirit works in me and all Christians. The Bible says so. My faith in God's promises says so. My experience says so. But I cannot prove it, any more than I can prove whether God heals the sick. But I know that he does.

Second, consider the lives of the Christians you know. How many Christians do you know who have been radically changed by their relationship with Jesus? How many men and women were unspeakable sinners when converted and are now remarkable examples of children of God?

The Holy Spirit acts to make us more Christ-like. The process may sometimes be subtle and slow but nonetheless powerful and effective. The evidence for it is the lives of countless Christians.

E. What does the Spirit do?

Perhaps the greatest difficulty many Christians have with the indwelling Spirit is the inability to see what the Holy Spirit can do. For example, Gus Nichols, a renowned preacher and author, and far from a liberal, published a book on the Holy Spirit.⁸ He concluded that the Spirit actually indwelt all Christians but that he could not determine what the indwelling Holy Spirit did. After all, Nichols concluded, he had never had a vision, felt a prompting, been spoken to by

⁸ Gus Nichols, *Lectures on the Holy Spirit* (Nichols Bros. Publishing Co. 1967).

God, or otherwise been noticeably affected by the Spirit's workings. But the rest of us noticed the Spirit working in Br. Nichols' life. This man was one of God's great servants, and he was too humble to see that the Holy Spirit had made him too Christ-like to recognize his own example of what the Spirit can do.

This very thing was prophesied by Jesus when Nicodemus asked him how to be saved.

(John 3:5-8) Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Jesus said that the workings of the Spirit will be mysterious and subtle. Neither its source nor its path will be obvious. Look out your window at the wind. Do you see it? But do you know that it is there? While the wind is invisible, its effects are visible and they prove the presence of the wind to those who have experienced it—or have been told what wind is and how it works.

Similarly, Jesus told his apostles,

(John 14:16-17) "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you."

The workings of the Spirit cannot be known or seen by the world. The Spirit is therefore more than miracles and signs. And his working cannot be understood strictly scientifically or rationally. (That is not to say that the Spirit is irrational. The Spirit's workings do not contradict sound logic. Neither can they be logically tested. The ultimate proof is revelation. On the other hand, there is nothing irrational or unscientific in the Bible's claims. Rather, these matters are outside the scope of science.)

Just so, the Spirit is only seen through its effects, but the presence of the Spirit is clearly seen by those who know what to look for and whose hearts have been opened to its workings. The many verses already discussed in the preceding tell us much about what to look for. There is even more:

1. Spiritual Judgment

(1 Cor. 2:14-15) The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment

Those who have the Spirit are able to understand Spiritual things that seem foolish to the world. Christians do not look at the world or God the way non-Christians do, and this is very much due to the influence of God through the Spirit.

2. Salvation

(1 Cor. 6:11) And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

(Titus 3:4-7) But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Your receiving the Holy Spirit saved you. That's why Acts 2:38 says what it does about the Spirit:

(Acts 2:38-39) Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call?"

All who are baptized for the forgiveness of sins receive the Spirit. This promise applies to all Christians, not just the Christians of the First Century—but also their children and all who are far off. Not just those on whom hands are laid, but "all."

Similarly, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians,

(1 Cor. 12:13) For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

All of us were given the Spirit, and this Spirit put us into the one body. Our relationship with the Spirit doesn't end there. We are given the one Spirit so we can drink this Living Water as a fountain of continuous salvation—so continuous that we will never thirst for salvation again.

3. Fruits of the Spirit

This fountain produces more than salvation. It urges Christians to produce fruit pleasing to God.

(Gal. 5:22-24) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

These qualities come from a Christian's penitent heart, but the Christian's heart is strengthened by the Spirit.

4. Strengthening of the heart

(Eph. 3:16-19) I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

This strength can also empower the Christian to a dynamic faith and an understanding of God's love and grace far beyond the Spirit-less man.

5. Unity

Another fruit of God's Spirit is unity. There is only one Spirit and there is one church only.

(Eph. 4:3-6) Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit just as you were called to one hope when you were called one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

6. Worship

Christians can be filled with the Spirit. The more a Christian tries to obey God, the more the Spirit strengthens the Christian to do just that.

(Eph. 5:18-21) Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

The Spirit encourages worship in song, thanksgiving, submission, and reverence (this is much broader than just the assembly). Moreover, the Spirit encourages prayer:

(Eph. 6:18) And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

(Jude 20) But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.

By now it should be obvious that all our worship is Spirit led.

(Phil. 3:3) For it is we who are the circumcision, we ... worship by the Spirit of God, ... glory in Christ Jesus, and ... put no confidence in the flesh

7. Joy

Similarly, the Spirit produces Christian joy.

(1 Thes. 1:6) You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

8. Sanctification

“Sanctification” is the Spirit’s work of making Christians increasingly holy and always penitent.

(Rom. 15:15-16) I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

(2 Thes. 2:13) But we ought always to thank God for you; brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

9. Evidence of salvation

The Spirit’s work also evidences our salvation. A baptized believer can tell that he still has the Spirit, and therefore is still saved, by looking at the state of his sanctification.

(1 John 3:24) Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

10. Other works of the Spirit

Moreover, we learned from our earlier readings that the Spirit does the following:

- Gives life.
- Eliminates Spiritual thirst.
- Wells up to eternal life.
- Permits service in the new way of the Spirit.
- Sets us free from the law of sin and death.
- Teaches us to live according to the Spirit.

- Teaches us to set our minds on what the Spirit desires.
- Gives life and peace.
- Gives life to our mortal bodies.
- Helps us put to death the misdeeds of the body.
- Makes us God's children.
- Let's us cry, "Abba, Father."
- Testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.
- Intercedes in our prayers and compensates for our weaknesses.
- Serves as a deposit, an earnest, a seal, and a guaranty.
- Makes each of us a temple
- Fills us with ever-increasing Glory.

What more could you want or need? Some of these things are evident only by faith. Others are plain to all. Others can see your life and tell if you've been filled with the Spirit. If you've been baptized as a penitent believer and if you live the life the Spirit desires, you're saved and anyone can tell.

F. Other key passages

There are a number of other passages that deepen our understanding of the Spirit.

1. Hebrews 8

The preceding discussion provides the background to understand the prophecy of Jeremiah quoted in Hebrews 8.

(Heb. 8:7-13) For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said:

"The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord.

“I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.

The new covenant is superior to and different from the old covenant. Unlike the old covenant, where God’s followers had no help to know God’s will, under this one, God will put his laws in the minds of the Christians, and he will write them on their hearts!

Does this mean that God will only save exceptional Bible students? Does it mean that Christians will be more intense Bible scholars than the Jews were? Certainly not, for that would mean that God was counting on man’s efforts. The Bible is plainly saying that the effort will be God’s under the new covenant.

Hebrews says that all God’s children will already know him and will be forgiven by this same power. How can this be? By now it ought to be obvious. Jeremiah was prophesying the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, according to 1 John 2:27, teaches us “all things,” meaning all things Spiritual. He teaches us all the things discussed in the preceding section, and that is very many things indeed.

Once again, none of this eliminates our own free will or the importance of our cooperation with the Spirit. But it means that we are absolutely guaranteed the help of God in understanding and doing his will, and we encourage this help and our being filled with the Spirit by putting to death the misdeeds of the body by the Spirit.

As we humbly empty ourselves by admitting our sins and our need for God’s help, not just to be saved but to be taught by God, the Spirit fills the emptiness with himself and replaces pride with power.

2. The baptism of Jesus.

There are only three events recorded in all four Gospels: the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, the feeding of the 5,000, and the baptism of Jesus. The first emphasizes the obvious importance of the sacrifice of Jesus. The second emphasizes the importance of caring for others (benevolence). And the third, Jesus’ baptism, teaches us about our baptism.

(Matt. 3:13-17) Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending

like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Jesus needed neither to receive the Spirit nor to be made God's Son. Thus, Jesus was baptized for our benefit as a powerful, visual lesson on baptism. Exactly as is true for each of us, when Jesus was baptized, he received the Holy Spirit and God declared him to be his child and that God is well pleased with him. When we are baptized, we always receive the Spirit (although not in the form of a dove), and God makes us his child and makes us well pleasing to him.

What is the difference between John's baptism and Jesus' baptism? The pat answer is that John's baptism is only for repentance, but there is much more to it than that.

(Mark 1:4) And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The phrase "for the forgiveness of sins" is word-for-word, letter-for-letter identical to the same phrase in Acts 2:38 describing Christian baptism. Both baptisms are declared to be for the forgiveness of sins. The true difference is seen in Acts 19:

(Acts 19:1-6) While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?"

"John's baptism," they replied.

Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

Paul determined whether the Ephesians' baptism was of John or of Jesus based on his query as to whether they had received the Holy Spirit, not whether they had received forgiveness of sins. Thus, the importance of the new baptism announced on Pentecost is not that sins were to be forgiven. John had already been baptizing for this purpose. The importance was forgiveness of sins due to the indwelling of the Spirit.

(Acts 2:38-39) Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

The significance of this difference will be further considered when we study grace.

3. The Spirit and prophecy

I have one last lesson before we move on to grace. The coming of the Holy Spirit was prophesied in the Old Testament, and these prophecies tell us much about the indwelling. The prophecies begin with Isaiah's prophecies about Jesus.

(Isa. 44:3-4) For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams.

God tells the Jews that their spiritual descendants, the Christians, will receive an outpouring of the Spirit.

(Isa. 59:21-60:3) "As for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD. "My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of **their descendants from this time on and forever,**" says the LORD.

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the **glory** of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his **glory** appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

Moreover, God's Spirit will be given to the new children of God "forever." Isaiah is not speaking only of the miracles to occur in the First Century. He plainly says that the gift of the Spirit will be "from this time on." He also associates the coming Spirit with God's Glory, which he says will rise upon the church and appear over it as it appeared over the temple when it was dedicated. It will illuminate the church with the brightness of the dawn. He calls on the church to "rise and shine" with the radiant Glory of God.

Ezekiel makes a similar prophecy regarding the coming Kingdom. The context of these prophecies makes clear that God is speaking figuratively of the church, the New Israel.

(Ezek. 11:19-20) I will give them an undivided heart **and put a new spirit in them;** I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

(Ezek. 36:26-27) I will give you a new heart **and put a new spirit in you;** I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. **And I will put my Spirit in you** and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

(Ezek. 37:14) "**I will put my Spirit in you** and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD."

(Ezek. 39:29) “I will no longer hide my face from them, for **I will pour out my Spirit** on the house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

When the Jews returned to Judea after their Babylonian captivity, God promised that the Glory would return to the temple and his Spirit would remain among his people. His Spirit would give life. Moreover, God would act on the hearts of his people to “move” his people to obey him and to have “undivided” hearts. However, this promise was not fulfilled until the coming of Jesus and the establishment of the church as the New Israel.

(Hag. 2:5-9) “This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And **my Spirit remains among you**. Do not fear.”

“This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory; says the LORD Almighty. ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine: declares the LORD Almighty. **The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house:** says the LORD Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace, declares the LORD Almighty.”

Centuries before Jesus came, the Old Testament was written to tell us that God’s Spirit dwells in all Christians. These prophecies assure us that the Spirit’s work in our lives is a part of God’s eternal plan for us.

G. Summary

The indwelling Spirit makes Jesus’ baptism superior to John’s. It saves us and empowers us. It is not just the Word. The Word is of critical importance, but by itself it only kills. We are saved by grace, and grace is delivered to us and made effective by the Spirit’s indwelling. Only Christians have the Spirit and all Christians have the Spirit. Lose the Spirit and you will lose your soul. Possess the Spirit and you are saved.

The indwelling is not “representational” or indirect. The Spirit operates directly on the hearts of all Christians. This operation is like the wind. Only its effects can be seen. And it is not evident to or even understandable by those with a worldly mind. It is seen only through the eye of faith.

Denial of the Spirit’s indwelling renders numerous passages nonsensical. The Spirit is spoken of in nearly every opening of the New Testament. It is just not enough to decide what these passages don’t mean. It is just not enough to criticize the views of others. We must incorporate the teachings of these passages into our own beliefs. We will all be better Christians if we study them, understand them, teach them, preach them, and live them.

We need to end the practice of some of believing in the Spirit’s role and work and refusing to publicly preach and pray about it. The Spirit is not divisive. It is unifying. There are times when it is best not to raise an issue that will only serve to divide God’s people. But we

have now tried for over 150 years to ignore this question, and the result is nothing but division. It is time to change tactics.

Discussion Questions:

1. What arguments support the Word-only view? What are the arguments that support an actual indwelling?
2. Why has this issue been troublesome to the Churches of Christ, when other similar groups readily accept an actual indwelling?
3. What can the Holy Spirit do in the life of a Christian today? What has the Holy Spirit done in your life?
4. How would you respond to a Pentecostal who believes that he needs the assurance that comes from speaking in tongues?
5. What does the Bible mean when it says that Christians should love, pray, and worship in the Spirit? What does the Bible mean when it says that Christians should be filled with the Spirit?
6. In Acts 6 seven men were appointed to provide food to the Hellenistic widows. These men were to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Most commentators teach that these were the first deacons. Are our deacons today supposed to be filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom? If so, what does this mean?
7. When a believer is baptized and is saved, he receives the indwelling Holy Spirit. Romans 8 teaches that he remains saved so long as the Spirit continues to dwell in him. Suppose he sins in such a manner as to lose his salvation. He must also have lost (or quenched) the Holy Spirit. How can he get the Holy Spirit back? What Bible passage demonstrates that a former Christian can regain the Holy Spirit? Does the former Christian have to be re-baptized to regain his salvation? Can he be re-baptized?

Chapter 4 Grace What Must I Do to Be (and Stay) Saved?

Good morning, class.

The series on the Holy Spirit have been completed the preceding week, and the teacher is now ready to build on these studies.

As I promised at the beginning of this series, we studied the Holy Spirit to build a foundation for a deeper understanding of grace.

Class, tell me, what is the definition of “grace”?

None of the students have had much to say yet, and no one wants to go first. Besides, the question seems too easy for them. The teacher waits. He knows that the experts say that no question will remain unanswered for more than 20 seconds. Eventually a girl on the front row raises her hand. “Unmerited favor,” she answers confidently.

Does everyone agree?

Heads nod all around.

Obviously, that is exactly right. And so, what is “unmerited favor”?

The teacher looks at the same girl. She starts to speak and then pauses. She is quickly lost in thought.

Anybody? Does anyone know what “unmerited favor” is?

The brighter students are being urged by the others to answer the question, but no one can. Soon the class is laughing at itself. One member volunteers, “I guess we all thought we knew what grace is, but we don’t know anything. We’ve talked about it all our lives, and we can’t even define it!”

Folks, we’ve been content for far too long with pat answers to some very important questions. The answer to this question will revolutionize your understanding of your religion. It will change your view of the Holy Spirit, baptism, worship, fellowship, being saved ... everything.

“I guess that’s why you’ve called this ‘revolutionary’ grace,” a student taunts.

That ... and to get you to come to the first class!

“Grace” is an odd word, because we only use it in the Biblical sense when we are discussing Bible issues. If you ask an unchurched person what “grace” means, he’d say “the ability to move fluidly and elegantly” or some such thing. Obviously, in church we use “grace” in a special, religious sense.

I am going to avoid teaching the Bible from the Greek as much as possible this semester, because I think that overusing Greek makes people think the Bible can only be understood by experts. But this is one case that calls for Greek.

The teacher writes *charisma* on the board.

Any guesses as to what this means? It's what made John Kennedy sexy, right? Does Bill Clinton have charisma?

The class loudly voices disagreeing opinions.

Charisma in the Greek means "gift." Plain and simple. It could be the gift of eloquent speech or it could be a birthday present. Any gift.

The "-ma" at the end of the word is a noun ending. It expands the root, charis, into a related noun. Charisma is the product of charis, a sort of "charis-thing." Charis is typically translated "grace." Therefore, grace is the quality of a person causing that person to give gifts.

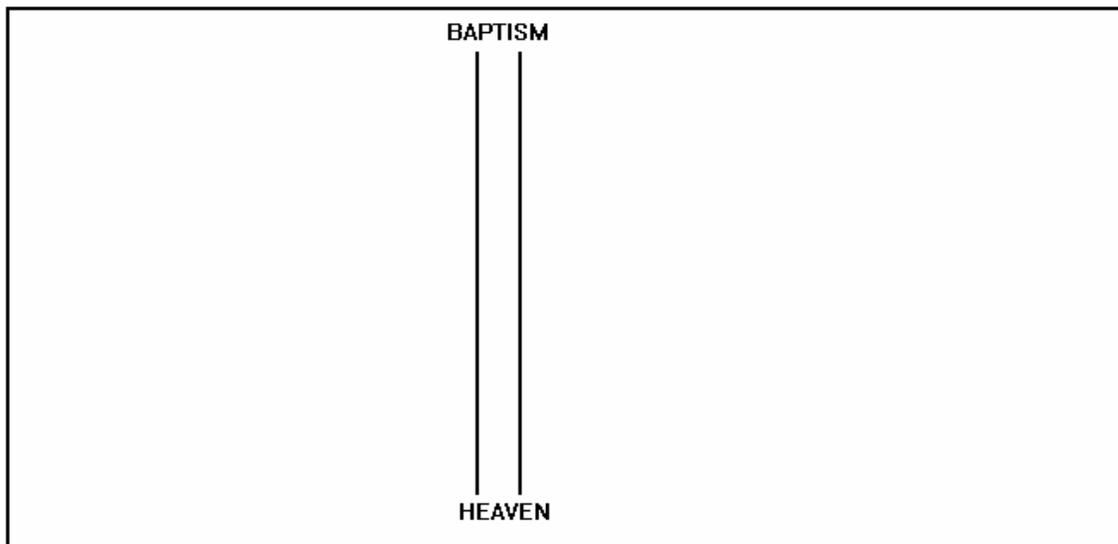
What would be another English word that means "the quality of being inclined to give gifts"?

The class makes several guesses. On the sixth try a student says, "Generosity! That's it, isn't it?"

That's right. "Grace" is just fancy church talk for generosity. And this class is simply about how very generous your God is.

Before we get any further into our studies, I want to tell a little of how I came to my present beliefs. I grew up in the Church, and I have always viewed a Christian's life something like this.

The teacher approaches the chalkboard and makes the following drawing:



The two lines in the middle represent “the straight and narrow path” or, in other words, being saved. Therefore, the rest of the board represents what?

The class stares at the board for a while. A student on the back row says, “Broad is the path that leads to destruction!”

Exactly. If you’re in the straight and narrow, you are saved, and if you are outside the straight and narrow, you are lost.

Now where should I place you right after you’re baptized?

Several class members point to the spot between the two lines and one says, “At the top, right under BAPTISM.”

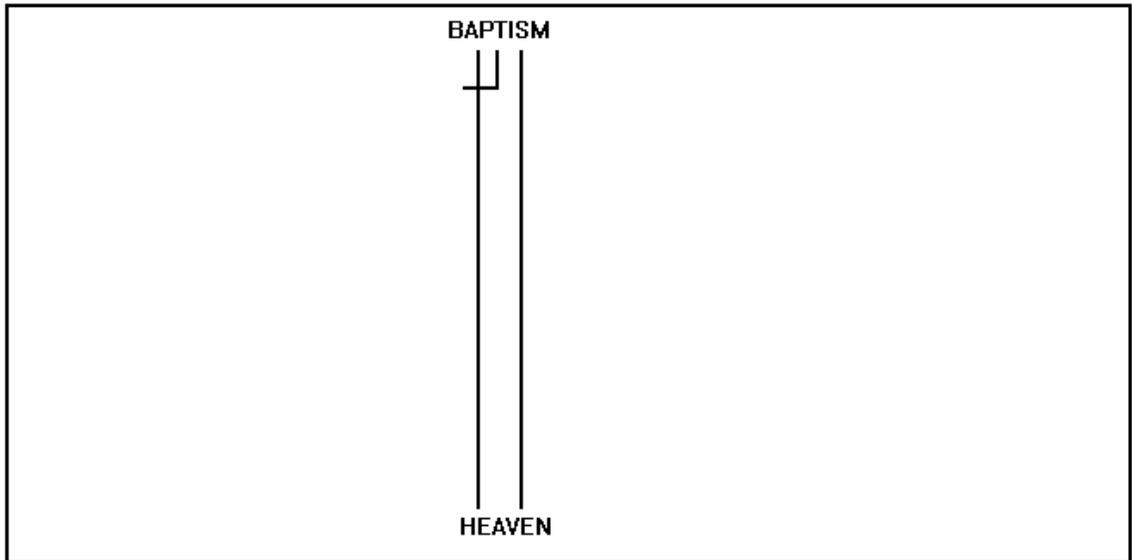
That’s right, of course.

The teacher goes to the board and draws a line down from BAPTISM and between the two lines.

For a long time, I was very conscious of sin in my life. I had been taught that one sin is enough to cost you your soul and that all sins are equal in the sense that all sins will be enough to damn you. I still believe that, by the way.

I was also taught that the only way to remove a sin from your record is to confess, repent, and pray for forgiveness. Until these three steps were complied with, the sin was charged to you and you stood lost.

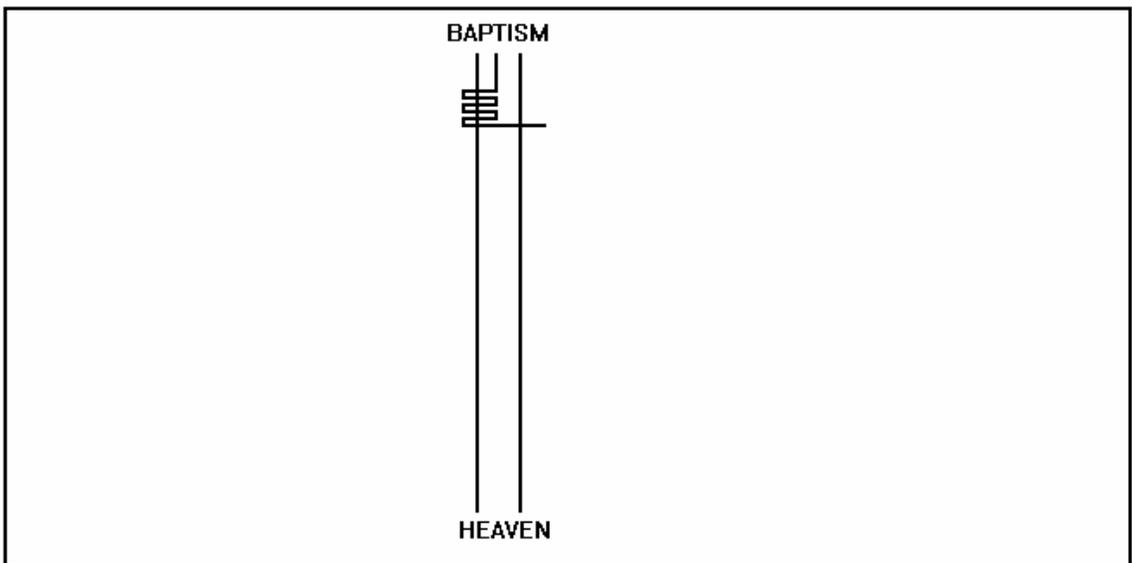
Therefore, my soul was washed whiter than snow when I was baptized. But after church, when I played in the playground and threw rocks and hit some cars in the parking lot, I had sinned. After all, I had been told by my parents not to throw rocks around cars and I did it anyway. The result is something like this—



That night, I prayed for forgiveness, and I was once again saved.

The teacher draws a line back into the straight and narrow portion.

Of course, the next morning, I didn't make up the bed, and I was lost again. But that night I prayed for forgiveness, and I was saved again. The next morning, I didn't take out the garbage, but that night I prayed for forgiveness, and I was again saved. My condition before God began to look like this—



I drew my last sin as moving me too far to the right for a reason. You can go too far either way. In this case, I lost my soul because I was guilty of being a Pharisee. But I didn't realize it at the time and so I didn't repent and confess. I asked God to forgive all my sins, but I continued in being a Pharisee for years! Was I lost all this time?

The class doesn't realize that the teacher might start asking questions again, and they are caught off guard. After a delay while they collect their thoughts, a student ventures, "But we're continuously saved. Doesn't 1 John teach that?"

Yes. 1 John 1:7 says exactly that. But we also believe that there can come a time when despite this continuous salvation, we become lost—unless and until we repent, confess, and pray for forgiveness, don't we?

The class is now clearly troubled. They had been taught two different rules and aren't sure that they understand either very well.

Most members of the Churches of Christ have come to just such a position on the matter. You stay saved so long as you are not guilty of any really major sins, but for a big enough sin, you fall away.

A student on the back row pipes up, "Like missing three services in a row."

Well, does missing a service with no excuse amount to sin?

The class reluctantly nods.

Is it possible that we don't know better—or haven't we all been taught to come to church?

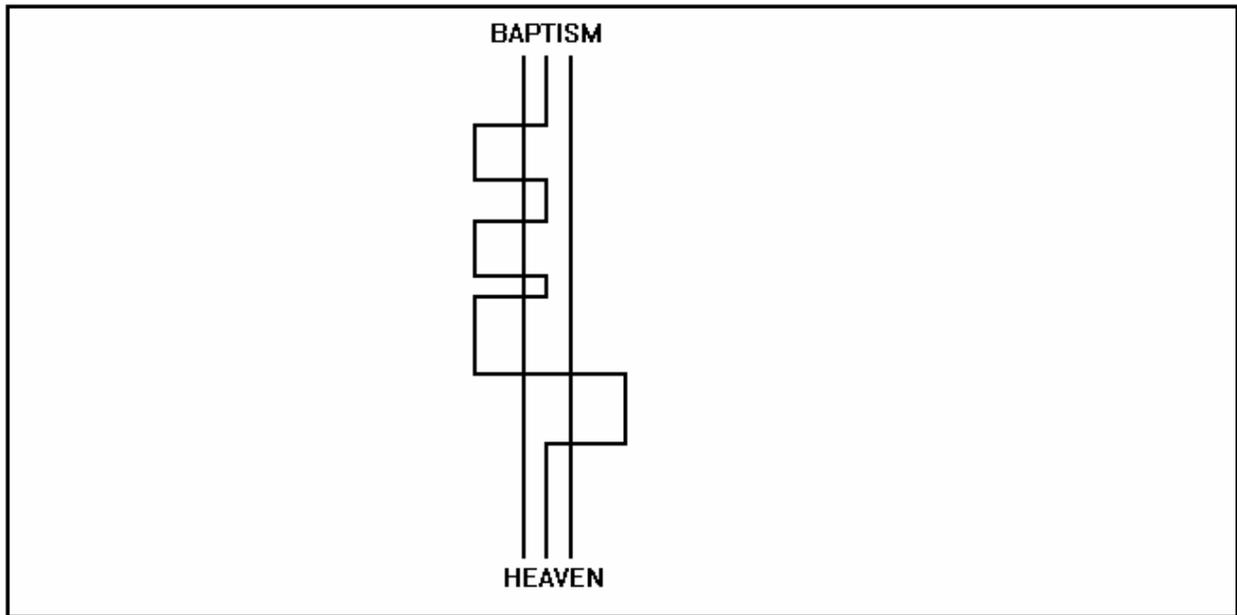
Again, the class reluctantly agrees.

So why shouldn't a willful sin like missing church cause you to be lost?

The class is growing frustrated. "Because we are saved by grace," one member says. "And not works," another adds. "God doesn't condemn us for every little sin. Besides, no one can know every sin he commits. God doesn't expect us to repent and confess every sin to be saved."

Many of us have come to view our salvation something like this.

The teacher redraws the board.



The idea is that we don't really move in and out of salvation on a daily basis. But there may come a time when one of us falls away and is lost. We are later restored by repenting, confessing, and asking forgiveness. Often this is accomplished by going forward in church.

Class, what kinds of sins would cause you to fall away so that you are lost until you repent?

"A willful sin," ventures one student.

You mean like missing church.

"Well, you know, a major sin." The other students shook their heads, because they knew what the next question would be.

Define "major."

"Beats me."

Notice this. The chart I just drew is really the same as the one that I just erased. In both charts, you move into salvation, and then you move out. And then you move in and then out all over again. The only difference is the scale, or how often you do so.

We rejected the first chart as contrary to our understanding of grace, but all we did was slow down a process that we had rejected. Moreover, when I ask you to define when someone falls away as shown on the chart, no one can express the standard. Just when is it that God takes away his salvation? We correctly reject the idea of once saved, always saved. And we've correctly rejected the notion of only being saved shortly after a prayer for forgiveness. But we still believe that Christians move in and out of salvation, but we are not sure when. And because we're not sure, many Christians can't ever feel saved or confident, even though the Bible tells us that we should be able to do so.

This is what we are going to study for the next few weeks. Now that we've been saved, are we still saved? And how do we know? Who falls away and loses his salvation? And what does the Bible say about coming back into the straight and narrow?

As promised, I have not covered all that there is to know about the Holy Spirit. The reason for this is that this book is about grace—revolutionary grace. The discussion of the Holy Spirit was necessary for you to be prepared to understand God's grace and as you learn more about his grace, you will greatly deepen and broaden your knowledge of the Spirit.

I suppose I should explain why I say God's grace is revolutionary. "Revolutionary" means having to do with revolution. "Revolution" has a number of meanings. For example, when the Jews captured Silas and Paul, the apostle of grace, the King James Version translates,

(Acts 17:6 KJV) And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have **turned the world upside down** are come hither also

You see, God's grace is revolutionary, first, because it turns the world upside down.

"Revolutionary" also means dramatically new. We in the Churches of Christ have talked about grace since the inception of the Restoration Movement, but in the middle part of this century our view of grace was very narrow—only wide enough for members of the Church of Christ to squeeze through, and not even all of them. We were unwilling to sing, "When We All Get to Heaven" and insisted on singing "When the Saved Get to Heaven" because we were afraid to believe that even all of *us* would be saved.

This is now changing, and a revolution in thought is occurring. Many vigorously resist these changes. Others have gone too far the other way. But even of those who have searched out the truth of the matter, very few have the depth of knowledge necessary to persuade those unsympathetic to their views or to accurately judge the limits of God's grace. There are, after all, some very real and important limits on how far grace will stretch.

My own experience, both personally and observed in others, is that we have largely added our new and improved understanding of grace to our previous body of Bible lessons without stopping to ask whether this notion of grace requires a re-thinking of any of our other Bible beliefs. We have asked our members to approach our traditional views with a new sense of confidence, but we have not changed our views on anything that affects why we should be confident. It's not surprising that many of our members still don't feel saved. We must stop and ask such key questions as:

- Which disagreements among Christians will be covered by grace and which will not?
- How do we deal with those in grace but mistaken on some matter of interpretation?
- Who is saved?

- How might I lose my salvation?
- How certain of my salvation can I be?
- How do works fit in? What if I choose to live a half-hearted Christian life and let grace handle the rest?
- How important is the pattern of worship and pattern of church organization? Will grace cover a church with an un-Biblical pattern?
- If I lose my salvation, can I come back? How? Must I be re-baptized? If I lose the Spirit, how do I get his indwelling back?
- Can a person in a denomination (meaning, not the Church of Christ) be saved if he is baptized for remission of sins? What if he is a former Church of Christ member who converted to a denomination? What if he was baptized by a denominational preacher?
- Who should be disfellowshipped and why? Can one church disfellowship another?
- Whom should we “mark”?
- Now that I’m saved, just what am I supposed to do?

These questions are the subjects of the following chapters.

A. Who is saved – Our relationship with Christ

I first gave serious thought to questions of grace during the first grade. The four first grade classes in my public elementary school would combine once a week to sing church songs led by one of the teachers. Children were encouraged to select their favorite songs.

I well remember sitting in one of these singalongs shortly after hearing a visiting preacher proclaim from my church’s pulpit that only members of the Church of Christ would go to heaven. He proved this to my satisfaction by reading Romans 16:16:

(Rom. 16:16b KJV) The churches of Christ salute you.

During our next weekly singalong, my heart went out to my classmates and teachers, who obviously loved Jesus but were sadly destined for hellfire. I stood among my peers and urged them all to come to church with me, since the Bible said that only members of my church would go to heaven. I was fired up and excited—especially so when I considered all the gold stars I would get for bringing this many visitors!

I can’t tell you how surprised I was that my teachers and classmates were furious and outraged at my effort to save them. One teacher suggested through clenched teeth that I should

go home and returned prepared to explain just where in the Bible it said that only members of the Church of Christ would go to heaven.

Thoroughly embarrassed, but fully persuaded of my position, I asked my mother to help me find this verse in the Bible. She pondered this one at length. She carefully recited Romans 16:16, suggesting that this must be the verse I had in mind. On hearing it again, I realized that it wasn't as strongly worded as I might have hoped. I told her that there must be another verse.

She assured me that there was not and that this was the only verse mentioning "churches of Christ" in the Bible. She then explained that "churches of Christ" was used to describe all churches that were a part of Christ's body. It was not a title. The Baptist Church, Methodist Church, and Presbyterian Church did not exist at this time. There was only one church. Therefore, Paul was not saying which church is saved. He was saying that the church is saved. The Bible, she explained, never mentions any church but the one church Jesus started.

I was shaken. The preacher had misled me, and I had been suckered into embarrassing myself before my friends, who now greatly resented me. I was an outcast from my fellow first graders. Desperately, I asked her if indeed only members of the Church of Christ would go to heaven. I explained that I had to return to class with some answer.

She paused. She paused a long time. A very long time. E-v-e-n-t-u-a-l-l-y she said that she did not know who was going to heaven. She was certain that those in the Church of Christ would, but God is a merciful God, and those in other churches might well be saved based on God's mercy.

A definite "maybe." I knew she was hedging. I also knew that if I was going to tell nearly everyone I knew in the world that they were damned, I had better have a verse or two in hand, but my hands were empty. I skulked back to class. I dreaded the next singalong.

When it came, my teacher asked me for my report. Was she going to heaven or not? I stammered and explained about how those outside the Church of Christ might be saved in God's mercy. Her eyes shot daggers through me. She spoke tersely, with clipped words: 'And I'm sure God is merciful and that we'll all be saved! Won't we?' What could I say? I had to agree with her. But I knew I really didn't know the answer.

We need a clearer understanding of who is saved. We are pretty clear in our thinking on how to become saved. You hear, believe, repent, confess, and are baptized. Nothing in this book will contradict these five steps, although I do hope to reach a deeper understanding of these steps. But we are very unclear on when a person who has been saved ceases to be saved. And what is such a person?

Do I lose my soul if I praise God contrary to the Biblical pattern? What if I am not aware of the problem and therefore never repent or stop offering such praise? At what point do I lose my soul?

If I lose my salvation, am I still a Christian? Is there such a thing as an unsaved Christian? How do I get my salvation back?

I struggled for years with these questions, because these questions are at the very heart of the divisions that have so plagued the Churches of Christ for so many years. I didn't come to a definite understanding until I first taught Hebrews.

In fact, Hebrews 3 was the key to a number of insights into the working of God's salvation. This chapter is primarily a warning against falling away. This warning tells us a great deal about how salvation can be lost and, therefore, how not to lose salvation.

(Heb. 3:7-19) So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, *8* do not harden your hearts as you did in the **rebellion**, during the time of testing in the desert, *9* where your fathers **tested and tried** me and for forty years saw what I did. *10* That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their **hearts are always going astray**, and they have not known my ways.' *11* So I declared on oath in my anger, '**They shall never enter my rest.**'"

12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, **unbelieving heart** that **turns away** from the living God. *13* But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be **hardened by sin's deceitfulness**.

14 We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. *15* As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not **harden your hearts** as you did in the **rebellion.**" *16* Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? *17* And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? *18* And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? *19* So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their **unbelief**.

The Hebrews writer makes a number of points:

If today's Christians are guilty of the same sins as the Israelites, they will suffer the same fate—they will "never enter" God's rest (heaven).

These sins are of two types—rebellion and unbelief. The writer uses a number of synonyms for "rebellion"—hardening your hearts, testing and trying God, having a hardened heart, having a heart that is always going astray. Unbelief is also described as turning away from the living God.

But the lesson works in both directions—those Christians who are *not* guilty of these sins will enter God's rest.

What is the opposite of unbelief? Obviously, faith.

What is the opposite of rebellion or having a hard heart? Being penitent, that is, repenting.

Therefore, a Christian ceases to be a Christian if he loses his faith or ceases to repent. Thus, he remains a Christian so long as he continues to believe and to repent. All those Christians who continue in their faith and repentance will enter God's rest.

This conclusion is confirmed by Hebrews 10:26-27, which states,

If we **deliberately keep on sinning** after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

Salvation is lost by deliberately continuing to sin, that is, by rebelling and having a hard heart rather than repenting.

At this point it is critical to notice just what "repent"/"rebel" and "belief"/"unbelief" mean. Too often we have tried to impose our opinions on these words, when the Bible actually gives very plain and easily understood meanings to them.

The sin of rebellion or falling away is most clearly defined in Hebrews 10:26 as deliberately continuing to sin. Note the following: Rebellion is not a single deliberate sin, no matter how awful. We all sin deliberately on occasion. Hopefully we also come to regret having done so, and so we repent of those sins. Nothing in Hebrews teaches that a Christian loses his salvation over a deliberate sin.

Sinning continuously is not enough either. We all sin on a regular, continuing basis. Those few of us who are not continuously guilty of greed, lust, materialism, or a failure to evangelize are at least guilty of pride. I've yet to meet the Christian who lives the life Jesus lived. Many have attained a level of Godliness far beyond anything I could hope to accomplish, and yet we have all sinned and continually do so and, frequently enough, do so deliberately.

No, the sin that costs you your salvation is deliberately continuing to sin. This is the exact opposite of repenting. This is, rather, the sin of rebellion, choosing to reject Jesus' will and to do what you want to do instead—choosing to reject Jesus as Lord.

Many other passages discuss repentance in similar terms.

(Rom. 8:13-14) For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you **put to death the misdeeds of the body**, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

No better definition of "repenting" can be given than "by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body."

Similarly, Hebrews 10:1 teaches us that "by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." A penitent person is a person "being made holy." God makes us holy through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. We must cooperate with his work, however, and grow in holiness, or we will lose the gift, as discussed below.

Philippians is to the same effect:

(Phil. 2:13) [I]t is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Notice that Paul directs this comment to all his readers, not just the “super Christians” or those presently living an especially holy life.

If God is effectively working in you (through his Spirit, among other means) to will (desire) and act according to his will, you are saved. And if you are saved, God will be working in you in this manner. There is no in-between. Paul states clearly that this statement is true of all Christians. God’s work is more effective in some Christians than in others, but if he is not working in you this way *at all*, you are not saved.

That unbelief can also cause a Christian to lose his salvation is confirmed in 1 John 4:2-3:

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but **every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.**

Belief is most clearly defined as acknowledging that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. This is simply the Great Confession:

(Matthew 16:16) “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus told Peter that he would build his church on this very declaration, and this defines saving faith.

We often misuse “faith” as meaning a set of denominational beliefs. We say, “He is of a different faith,” “He has left the faith,” “He is not faithful,” “We are defending the faith.” Defending your view on divorce and remarriage may well be Christian and good, but it is not defending the “faith.” Jesus did not build his church on his teachings on remarriage. The unbelief that John condemned in 1 John 4 is not rejection of John’s views on predestination; it’s rejection of the divinity of Christ. Doctrines on such matters as divorce and remarriage and predestination are not unimportant, but they are not part of the Great Confession. Neither did we confess our faith on such matters to be accepted for baptism. We baptize based on faith in Jesus—a person—not faith in any doctrine.

While doctrines of divorce and remarriage, predestination, eating in the church building, missionary societies, soloists, choirs, instruments, one cup, Sunday schools, and countless other issues that have divided God’s children matter, they are not “faith.” On the other hand, a penitent person will want to do God’s will and, to do it, will study his Bible to make certain that what he does is indeed God’s will.

Thus, once a person is saved, he stays saved unless and until he ceases to repent—to the point of hardening his heart against the work of the Holy Spirit—or loses his faith, that is, his belief that Jesus is God’s Son.

Notice that the Bible considers faith and penitence as two sides of the same coin. Neither can truly exist without the other. For example, in Hebrews 3, the author concludes his argument as follows:

(Heb. 3:18-19) And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who **disobeyed**? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their **unbelief**.

Clearly, the writer concludes that the disobedience that causes a falling away necessarily results from a lack of faith.

James' familiar passage on this point is to the same effect:

(James 2:14) What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

The point is not that a man is saved by works, but that repentance must follow a true faith. A penitent Christian will produce good works.

When I first reached this point in my initial study of Hebrews, the thought occurred to me that salvation ultimately is a matter of our relationship with Jesus. Therefore, I should consider how these principles could be expressed in terms of how a Christian relates to Jesus.

Repentance, therefore, is not just good works (some atheists put most of us Christians to shame in terms of good works)—it is making Jesus Lord of your life. Good works by a non-Christian merit nothing because they are not the fruits of Jesus' Lordship. Obviously, while you can perform great works without faith, you cannot repent without faith. How can you make someone Lord if you don't believe in him?

Just so, faith in Jesus also means belief in Jesus as Lord of the universe. How can you truly believe that Jesus is God's Son and Lord of all creation and not yield to his will? While the demons "believe and tremble," they do not accept Jesus as Lord and thus do not have Biblical faith.

Thus, Biblical passages that seem to only require faith as a condition of salvation, such as John 3:16, actually also require repentance. Likewise, Acts 2:38 requires faith when Peter commands repentance. We will consider these thoughts further after reflecting on how we were saved.

In the early 1800's, at the beginning of the Restoration Movement, a group of congregations under the leadership of Alexander Campbell sent the Movement's first missionary, Walter Scott, to the Ohio frontier. Soon the churches were receiving reports of Scott's amazing success. They were skeptical that he could get these fabulous results and be preaching the true gospel. They called him in from the mission field to defend himself: Scott explained that he taught the gospel based on a "five-finger exercise": believe, repent, confess, be baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit. The congregations were pleased with the simplicity and soundness of this method of conveying the plan of salvation and returned Scott to the mission field with their blessings.

This exercise has been modified in current use to replace “receive the Holy Spirit” at the end with “hear” at the beginning, doubtlessly due to the teaching against a literal indwelling that prevailed in the 20th Century. Nonetheless, the approach is, of course, very sound and still effectively teaches the elements of salvation.

The same material can be viewed from different perspectives, and additional insights can be gained from doing so. Hearing, believing, and confessing are all components of “faith.” After all, “hearing” is simply hearing the gospel.

(Rom. 10:14) How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

(This passage also teaches that faith is simple faith in “the one”—Jesus.)

“Confession” is simply confession of this faith. Romans 10:9 teaches,

If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

After all, how could anyone baptize you unless you first declared your faith?

We can very appropriately refer to all three of these “fingers” as “faith,” as the Bible frequently does. For example, in John 3:16, Jesus says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” We understand readily that “believes” in this passage includes “hears” and “confesses.”

Thus, one may be saved if he (1) believes and (2) repents, with salvation occurring at the point of (3) baptism. He remains saved so long as he (1) believes and (2) repents. He loses his salvation if he “un-believes” or “un-repents,” that is, if he loses his faith or if his heart is so hardened against Spirit that he will no longer repent.

This same thought can be expressed in a more Christ-centered fashion. Salvation is simply accepting Jesus. Faith is accepting Jesus as the Son of God. Penitence is accepting Jesus as Lord. We lose our salvation when we reject the Sonship or the Lordship of Jesus. This gives some depth to the idea of having a “personal relationship” with Jesus. Salvation springs from accepting Jesus as he presents himself. Salvation continues from remaining in this relationship. The essence of salvation is not obeying rules, but standing in a right relationship—based on faith and repentance (but, of course, a penitent person will endeavor to obey whatever Jesus has commanded).

Mere doubts about the divinity of Christ will not cost a Christian his soul. Moreover, we cannot necessarily judge a rejection from a human perspective. For example, when my four-year old son tells me, “I’m not going to be your friend any more!” or “I don’t want you to be my daddy any more!” I understand that he is saying that he is very angry, but I also understand that we will still be friends and that he will be glad for me to be his daddy when he cools off. I don’t disown him and he remains my son continuously throughout this process, although these times are very hard on this daddy’s feelings.

Just so, many a Christian has suffered through a time when he was angry with God. Many people blame God for the loss of a loved one or for other difficult times. As a result, such a Christian will sometimes temporarily deny his faith. Such denials are very serious problems, but only God can judge whether the denials are real or just venting an anger that will eventually subside and give way to repentance.

Similarly, only God sets a limit how long we can wait to repent. We cannot condemn a brother who refuses to repent of a sin, because he may yet repent. Only God knows, and he knows perfectly.

B. The role of the Holy Spirit in our salvation

We must also look at these questions from the perspective of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is received at the point of baptism (Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 12:13). All Christians have the Holy Spirit, and only Christians have the Holy Spirit. Romans 8 makes this clear:

(Rom. 8:9-11) You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

Paul clearly states that you cannot be a Christian and not possess the Holy Spirit and that anyone not possessing the Holy Spirit is not saved. This passage adds further support to the conclusion that the Holy Spirit is received at baptism, because a convert would not be saved upon being baptized unless he received the Holy Spirit at the same time.

However, a Christian can “grieve” the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30. See also Acts 7:51). Ultimately, a Christian may lose the Holy Spirit. 1 Thessalonians 5:19 teaches us that the Holy Spirit can be “quenched,” as translated in the King James Version. “Quenched” in the original Greek does not refer to quenching a thirst, which will soon return. Rather the word refers to dousing a fire. The New International Version comes closer to the sense in modern English when it translates, “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire.” Clearly, Christians can and sometimes do put out the Spirit’s fire, and when they lose the indwelling, they not only lose the many blessings of the indwelling, they lose their salvation.

The significance of this line of reasoning is perhaps better seen from a different perspective. For example, what happens to the indwelling when a Christian back slides or loses his salvation? Where was the Holy Spirit while the Christian had not yet repented? If he possessed it, then Romans 8 plainly teaches that Christ will save him, and therefore he was never in a lost condition. But if he did not possess it, he was surely lost. If he lost the indwelling, how might he get it back? Where in the New Testament are we taught that someone who lost the Holy Spirit’s indwelling can regain it? Must he be re-baptized? Can he be re-baptized? The only occasion in the New Testament when someone was baptized a second time is the account of the Ephesians in Acts 19. But their first baptism was John the Baptist’s baptism, and thus not Christian baptism. There is no account of anyone ever receiving two Christian baptisms.

C. Acts' accounts of Pentecost, the Samaritans, and Cornelius and his household

One of the major themes of this book is that all saved people (and only saved people) possess the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The truth of this idea is shown by many passages, especially Romans 8. However, I typically find that when I present this concept to a class, some class members are concerned about how to reconcile this truth with the accounts in Acts of the apostles' receipt of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (without water baptism), the Samaritans' receipt of the Holy Spirit (after water baptism), and the receipt of the Holy Spirit by Cornelius and his household (before water baptism).

I am aware of two explanations for the apparent inconsistency, either of which demonstrates that there is no contradiction. Nonetheless, this is a side issue to the points I wish to emphasize in this book, and so I will not provide as thorough an answer as possible. But the following summary should be sufficient for our purposes.

The explanation typically given within the Churches of Christ points out that Jesus received the Spirit without "measure" (John 3:34). Thus, Christians must receive the Spirit with measure, that is, in a more limited way.

It is then pointed out that the apostles received a baptism of the Spirit in Acts 2 as did Cornelius and his household in Acts 9. But these are the only two times that anyone is spoken of as having received the baptism of the Spirit. Therefore, the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a unique "measure" of the Spirit received only on these two occasions. It is different from and in addition to the indwelling common to all Christians, referred to as the ordinary or common measure.

In Acts 8, the Samaritans did not receive the Spirit until the apostles' hands were laid on them, and Simon Magus observed that the power to perform miracles was granted through the laying on of hands by the apostles. Similarly, the Ephesians in Acts 19 began to speak in tongues when Paul laid hands on them.

Therefore, the Spirit is received either without measure (in the case of Jesus) or with measure (everyone else). There are three measures, the baptism of the Holy Spirit (unique to the apostles and Cornelius), the grant of miraculous powers (the Samaritans, the Ephesians, and everyone else who could perform miracles), and the ordinary indwelling (all Christians).

Only the ordinary indwelling can occur today, because (1) Ephesians 4:5 states that there was only one baptism by the time that letter was written (long after Cornelius' conversion) and (2) the power to impart miraculous powers died with the apostles.

The alternative interpretation is that all Christians receive the same indwelling when saved. The indwelling Spirit gives gifts to Christians, which may be miraculous or non-miraculous. Miracles were done to confirm the Word and are no longer necessary (Heb. 2:4).

Under this interpretation, there have been three exceptions to this general rule under the new covenant: the receipt of the Holy Spirit by the apostles at Pentecost without baptism, the baptism of the Samaritans with the Holy Spirit being received only later when the apostles laid hands on the converts, and the conversion of the household of Cornelius, when the Holy Spirit was received before baptism without the laying on of hands. These three exceptional occasions,

each recounted in Acts, form the outline of Acts based on the theme announced by the angel upon the ascension of Jesus in Acts 1:8—“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Moreover, each extraordinary occurrence compelled the apostles to take the next step commanded by the angel.¹

A lengthy discussion of the relative merits of the two views could be offered, but would contribute nothing to the issues in this book. For our present purposes, it is sufficient to see that the accounts in Acts do not by any means contradict or disprove the teachings of the rest of the New Testament regarding who has the Spirit’s indwelling.

Discussion Questions:

1. Review all the New Testament scriptures that you can think of that speak of a Christian’s “faith.” Are there any that use the term in the same sense in which we often use it, that is, as our positions on the issues?
2. Is being saved the same thing as entering into a special relationship with Jesus? Why or why not?
3. How does a Christian lose his or her salvation? Having lost it, how can salvation be regained? Where does the Bible say that salvation once lost can be regained?
4. How does the Holy Spirit participate in our relationship with Jesus? What role does the Spirit play?
5. What is our relationship with Jesus based on, that is, what enables us to enter into the relationship?
6. What do you have to know to be saved? What issues must you have the correct position on to be saved?
7. What do you have to know to remain saved? What issues must you have the correct position on to remain saved?

¹ See Brunner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* for a more thorough discussion. See also Harvey Floyd, *Is the Holy Spirit for Me?*

Chapter 5

Grace—Hebrews’ Teaching about Our Once-for-All Salvation

I was next confronted with the question of grace at Bible camp, which I first attended after graduating from the first grade. One of my cabin mates cried until his big brother, David, agreed to sleep with us. David was much more mature and wise than the rest of us, being twice as educated as a result of successfully completing the second grade. We immediately hit it off and became camp buddies.

Late in the week, David confided that he wanted to be baptized when he got home. I told him to go ahead and do it now, since he might die before Saturday. In those days every other sermon seemed to be a warning against sudden, unprepared death, and we all prayed “if I should die before I wake.” Death was always just around the corner. David wisely stated that he wanted to talk to his parents first, and we agreed that he should take his chances.

David then told me that he had baptism figured out. He couldn’t delay baptism, because death could come at any time, but he knew that he would continue to sin after baptism. To be sure these sins were forgiven, he planned to get baptized every week!

I agreed with the obvious brilliance of this plan and couldn’t imagine why no one had thought of it before. But the practicalities weighed heavily on me. Would the preacher actually let him do this? Surely not. I told David that he would have to take his chances on dying young or on being baptized before he was able to completely stop all sinning. A tough choice indeed!

As childish as this viewpoint is, it was not novel with David. Soon after the apostles had died, the early church forgot much of their teaching on the Holy Spirit and grace. The writings of the early, uninspired church leaders are remarkably devoid of appreciation for the grace taught in the New Testament. This is probably due to the extraordinarily wicked condition of the Roman Empire, the church’s desire to emphasize righteous living, and its fear that teaching on grace might be used as an excuse for continuing to sin. This failure to teach grace eventually resulted in a practice where many believers refused baptism until they had reached the point of death, concluding that it was better to take a chance on an unexpected death than to waste a once-in-a-lifetime forgiveness by being baptized and then sinning without the opportunity for a second baptism!

This brings us to one of the major themes of Hebrews—the “once for all” nature of our salvation. The Hebrews author makes the amazing assertion that Christians are made “perfect forever” and “completely” saved. Our salvation is not temporary or transient, but is a “once for all” event.

(Heb. 7:23-28) Now there have been many of those priests [under the Law of Moses], since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to **save completely** those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins **once for all** when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been **made perfect forever**.

Jesus' priesthood is superior to the Old Testament priesthood because Jesus lives forever and is sinless, having been made "perfect forever" and having sacrificed for our sins "once for all." The Old Testament priests were required to offer repeated sacrifices for sin because of the imperfections of the sacrifices. Jesus offered the perfect sacrifice, which does not need to be repeated.

The Hebrews writer then draws some powerful conclusions from the nature of Jesus' sacrifice:

(Heb. 9:24-28) For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared **once for all** at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

The writer emphasizes the point earlier made in chapter 7—Jesus has been sacrificed once for all. Moreover, if this sacrifice were not sufficient, Jesus would be called on to die again and again, a ghastly thought indeed.

(Heb. 10:1-2) The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, **make perfect** those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed **once for all**, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.

The old covenant was inadequate because it could not make the worshippers perfect and it could not eliminate all guilt. The worshippers under the old covenant "felt guilty." Under the new covenant, worshippers are truly made perfect and should no longer feel guilty.

(Heb. 10:10) [W]e have been **made holy** through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ **once for all**.

The argument is now extended. Not only is Jesus' sacrifice once for all, but so is *our salvation*. Just as there was only one event in mankind's history when Jesus offered his sacrifice, there is only one event in a Christian's life when he is made holy, and the forgiveness that occurs can never be repeated because it too is "once for all." Verse 10 answers the problem described in

verse 2. Verse 2 points out that under the old covenant the worshippers were not cleansed once for all because the old sacrifices had to be repeated. Verse 10 says that under the new covenant this problem is solved. Christians are indeed forgiven once for all.

Thus, we do not need nor do we require cleansings each time we pray for forgiveness. We have been cleansed of our sins once—for all. Indeed, we've been made perfect forever.

(Heb. 10:11-18) Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered **for all time one sacrifice for sins**, he sat down at the right hand of God.

Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has **made perfect forever** those who are being made holy.

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says:

“This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.”

Then he adds: “Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.” And where these have been forgiven, **there is no longer any sacrifice for sin**.

The idea is now expanded even further. Jesus is now sitting at the right hand of God, having completed his sacrifice and priestly duties. The sacrifice will never be repeated—once you have been saved, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin! Fortunately, no sacrifice is needed because Christians are “made perfect forever.” This is the same phrase applied to Jesus himself in Hebrews 7:28.

This thought is too powerful to pass by without reflection. The Bible teaches, and teaches plainly, that when a penitent believer is baptized, *all* his sins are forgiven. Not only are his past sins forgiven, but also his future sins! This is not to suggest that Hebrews teaches once saved, always saved. It most certainly does not, as the next few verses show.

(Heb. 10:26-27) If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, **no sacrifice for sins is left**, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

Just as the writer earlier teaches that no sacrifice is left (or needed) for those who remain in Christ, he teaches that if we fall away by rejecting the Lordship of Jesus, no further sacrifice is available to once again wash away our sins. The “once for all” nature of Jesus’ sacrifice is a two-edged sword. If we remain in Christ, we are made perfect forever. The blessing is total. If we throw away the blessing, however, it cannot be regained.

This conclusion is also taught by another Hebrews passage.

(Heb. 6:4-6) It is **impossible** for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, **if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance**, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

The writer concludes that it is impossible for those who fall away to be brought back to repentance. The language could not be stronger. “Impossible” means impossible. It is the same Greek word used in these verses:

(Heb. 6:18) God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is **impossible** for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.

(Heb. 10:4) Mt is **impossible** for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

(Heb. 11:6) And without faith it is **impossible** to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

It is no more possible for the person described in Hebrews 6 to be restored to repentance (and hence saved anew) than it would be possible for God to lie, for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins, or for God to be pleased by someone with no faith.

On the other hand, we must not misunderstand what the passage does teach. The falling away that makes repentance impossible is the falling away described in chapters 3 and 10 that we earlier considered. Thus, a Christian will not fall unless he has given up his faith in Jesus or has ceased being penitent. In fact, Hebrews 6 gives us the limit of salvation—a Christian is penitent enough to remain saved until he is no longer able to repent. After all, if the Christian ultimately does repent, it must not have been impossible to repent. And if it was not impossible for the Christian to repent, he could not have fallen away.

Nothing in Hebrews (or anywhere else) suggests that there might be an in-between falling away where salvation is lost but might be regained. Hebrews 6 is clearly referring back to “falling away” as used in Hebrews 3 and deals with any falling away. Hebrews 10 is just as broad.

Thus, God’s grace is very broad indeed! It continuously covers the sins of all Christians so long as they remain penitent. Only God knows our hearts, but anyone who truly repents has never been lost (but may have been in serious jeopardy of losing his soul, as we will discuss later).

Hebrews 12:15 teaches the same thing as Hebrews 6:4-6:

See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no **bitter root** grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

This verse is a reference back to Deuteronomy

(Dent. 29:18-20) Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no **root** among you that produces such **bitter** poison. When such a person hears the words of this oath, he invokes a blessing on himself and therefore thinks, “I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way.” This will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry. The LORD will never be willing to forgive him; his wrath and zeal will burn against that man. All the curses written in this book will fall upon him, and the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven.

The Hebrews writer is warning his readers against the sin God will never forgive—the sin of going your own way, the sin of rejecting Jesus as Lord.

Some people have confused grace with the right to go their own way. We call this “cheap grace,” which is not really grace at all. It is the road to damnation. It is not surprising that the Hebrews writer follows his lessons on confidence and assurance with warnings against falling away. We should do the same thing. What could be more irresponsible than teaching our members a version of grace that fails to warn them about the cost of going their own way?

A. The principal commentaries on Hebrews 6:4-6

Perhaps the most controversial passage affecting the opinions expressed in this book is Hebrews 6:4-6 declaring that no one who has fallen away can repent again so as to be saved.

These notes summarize and critique the interpretations of this passage by a number of leading commentaries written by Church of Christ authors or as part of a major non-denominational commentary series. We must not rely too heavily on the commentaries. They are, like this book, only the opinions of uninspired men. But certainly the opinions of respected Bible scholars should be reviewed before reaching a final conclusion.

1. Church of Christ commentaries

The three most popular commentary series written by members of the Churches of Christ are the Gospel Advocate series, the Sweet series, and the Coffman series.

a. The Gospel Advocate commentary on Hebrews, by Robert Milligan

The Gospel Advocate Commentary series has been the standard resource of members of the Churches of Christ for many years. The series gathers commentaries written over many years by various Church scholars into a single set. The commentary on Hebrews was written by Robert Milligan, one of the great scholars of the Restoration Movement. It was first published around 1892 and was republished in 1962.

Milligan’s comments are thorough and lengthy. His principal points are summarized as follows:

We must with the help of God strive earnestly to go on to perfection; for otherwise, we are in constant danger of apostatizing,¹ and of placing ourselves beyond the possibility of recovery. For it is impossible, he says, to renew and save those who were once in covenant with Christ, but who have apostatized from him.

Various attempts have been made, but in vain, to soften the meaning of this expression. ...

It is therefore possible that a man may have been once enlightened, ... and nevertheless fall away beyond the reach of recovery.

... Or does God then also withdraw his converting and renewing power from every such abandoned sinner? That [this is] true seems very evident

The mere backslider, though fallen, has still faith in Christ. It may be very weak, and almost ready to perish. But with proper care it may be revived and strengthened, and the poor repenting sinner will then mourn over his sins and transgressions, as one that mourns for an only son, as “one that is in bitterness for his first-born.”

With regard to the arguments made in Hebrews 10, Milligan comments,

The man who was once a Christian, a true child of God, and who as such was made a partaker of the Holy Spirit, and yet falls away as an apostate from Christ, can obtain no more forgiveness in any way.

b. The Coffman commentary on Hebrews, by Burton Coffman

Burton Coffman, the former minister of the Manhattan Church of Christ, published commentaries on the entire New Testament, a remarkable achievement, and all the more so for the impressive breadth and insight of his books. His commentary on Hebrews was published in 1971. With regard to chapter 6 he states,

Just so, once a Christian quenches the sacred Spirit within his soul, that too is final, the destiny of that soul being then and there finally determined.

What then is the sin that can cause so fatal and final a result? The answer is any sin engaged in, loved, and preferred over fellowship with God. ... The unpardonable sin or eternal sin is thus any sin that results in the death of the spiritual life; and therein lies the danger of all sin. ... No person physically dead is concerned about his condition. Thus, no person whose life has already been severed eternally from God could have the slightest possible concern over the matter, least of all any feeling of guilt, remorse, or anxiety. ...

¹ “Apostate” means someone who has fallen away. To “apostatize is to fall away.

Fortunately for all men, the spiritual life is quite persistent and hardy; and it may be that relatively few, even of the most hardened rebels against God, have actually gone so far as to reach the “impossible” state. Peter’s description of the condition, cited above, does not affirm that those “who are entangled” in sins are in the “worse” state, but those who “are again entangled and overcome.”

With regard to chapter 10, Coffman quotes Milligan.

c. The Sweet commentary on Hebrews, by James Thompson

R. B. Sweet Co., Inc. published *The Living Word Commentary* as a series of commentaries by Church of Christ Bible scholars beginning in the 1960’s, with the New Testament being completed in the 1970’s. James Thompson authored the commentary on Hebrews, published in 1975. Everett Ferguson is the editor of the series.

The critical passage from Thompson’s commentary is as follows:

It is impossible to restore apostates again to repentance. Repentance refers here, as in verse 1, to the beginning of the conversion experience. The conversion experience is a once-for-all event, having happened only once. It is significant that the author uses the aorist participle (having been enlightened, having tasted, etc.) to express the fact that conversion is a once-for-all event. The word for restore (anakainizo) can also refer to the spiritual rebirth associated with baptism. Thus, because this event happened once, the author says that it is impossible to restore apostates again by the process of conversion. ...

The reason for the author’s vigorous stance is to be found in his view of Christ. A central view of the book of Hebrews is that the death of Christ is once-for-all (7:27; 10:10). The superiority of the sacrifice is that, whereas the levitical sacrifice was repeated annually, Christ died once-for-all (9:26; 10:1ff.). This “onceness” of Christ’s sacrifice has its counterpart in the uniqueness of conversion. The Christian has been once enlightened just as Christ died once. Thus to repeat one’s conversion would be to repeat Christ’s crucifixion. To repeat one’s conversion would be to crucify (literally “to recrucify”) the son of God. Because there can be no more sacrifice by Christ, there cannot be another conversion, for these once-for-all events cannot be repeated.

This is in complete agreement with the author. However, the commentary then makes a surprising statement:

It is important in understanding the author’s stern warning that he is not dealing with a situation where there are apostates wanting to return to the church. Instead, he is pointing to the danger that threatens the community in order to encourage steadfastness. He is looking forward to the potential apostate, not backward to the actual penitent.

This statement is absurd. If we believe that the Bible (including Hebrews) is inspired, then we cannot accept the notion that the author has at great length and detail laid out his view of falling away and restoration, basing it on the once-for-all nature of Christ's death, only to scare people into not falling away, but not really meaning it! Is the author of Hebrews serious or is he exaggerating for effect? How can the commentator state that Hebrews is not looking backward to the actual penitent, when the Bible says that there never will be an actual penitent? (There will be many saved people who are penitent, but none who have lost their salvation and then repented.)

2. Non-denominational commentary series

There have been many excellent commentary series published in the last few decades. The three most prominent among those not tied to a particular denomination are Barclay's Daily Study Bible, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, and The New International Commentary on the New Testament.

a. Barclay

William Barclay was a brilliant Bible scholar and one of the most knowledgeable men ever in terms of ancient literature. His commentaries show an amazing range of references to legends, poems, and language. Unfortunately, Barclay took a low view of inspiration and actually seemed to relish finding arguments against the inspiration of scripture.

With regard to Hebrews 6, Barclay states,

What does he mean when he says that it is impossible that those who have become apostates can ever be renewed to repentance? ... But when we read this passage we must remember one thing—it was written in an age of persecution: and in any age of persecution apostasy is the supreme sin. ... This particular way of putting things has always emerged during and after persecutions. ... Who is any man to say that any other man is beyond the forgiveness of God? What it is meant to show is the terrible seriousness of choosing existence instead of Christ.

While no man may say that another man is beyond forgiveness, God may—and he may inspire a man to say so. Barclay says that Hebrews is just not true, but is an exaggeration arising out of the persecutions that gave rise to the book. But he is at least honest enough to acknowledge that the passage means what it says, he just refuses to accept what it says. This is not surprising coming from someone who doubted the inspiration of many New Testament books.

b. Tyndale

The Tyndale commentaries are conservative, in the sense that they vigorously defend the inspiration of scripture. Thomas Hewitt authored the commentary on Hebrews. Although the series as a whole does not follow a single denominational line, obviously the individual commentaries follow the biases of their authors. Hewitt takes a Calvinist view. As to chapter 6, the commentary states:

The difficulty of interpretation of one of the severest warnings given in Scripture cannot be exaggerated. This part of holy Scripture must be interpreted in light of other parts of holy Scripture, one part should not contradict another... .

The author then lists three theories of interpretation. The first is the one proposed in this book. He rejects it because it contradicts his own notion of once saved, always saved. The second proposed theory is that the author of Hebrews is dealing with non-Christians who have never been saved. He rejects this notion as contrary to the description of those who have fallen away, and I certainly agree.

The third theory is clearly the author's own view:

3. The Hypothetical theory . . . [T]he writer is dealing with supposition and not with fact, so that he may correct wrong ideas.

He concludes that it is impossible to fall away at all (once saved, always saved), and therefore the situation described in Hebrews can never happen. Thus, the passage means nothing since the situation described can never actually occur.

What a low view of scripture! Why would God trouble himself to inspire a man to write a book about situations that can never occur?

c. The New International Commentary.

This is another nondenominational series by multiple authors. It is among the most scholarly and detailed series of its type, and is heavily relied on and cited by almost all commentaries that have been published since its publication. The commentary on Hebrews is by F. F. Bruce, one of the great conservative New Testament scholars of this century. He was also the general editor of the series.

Bruce comments on chapter 6,

It is possible for people who can be described in the language of verses 4 and 5 to "fall away" irretrievably. This warning has been both unduly minimized and unduly exaggerated.

Bruce then criticizes the view that the situation is hypothetical and can never really happen:

The warning in the passage was a real warning against a real danger, a danger which is still present so long as "an evil heart of unbelief" can result in "falling away from the living God."

He also rejects the view that "because" should be translated "while":

By suggesting that these people cannot be brought back to repentance so long as they repudiate Christ, this rendering might be thought to imply that when they cease to repudiate Him repentance will be possible. But

this is certainly not what is meant. To say that they cannot be brought to repentance so long as they persist in their renunciation of Christ would be a truism hardly worth putting into words.

Instead, Bruce interprets the passage at face value:

People who commit this sin [falling away due to willful sin], he says, cannot be brought back to repentance; by renouncing Christ they put themselves in the position of those who, deliberately refusing his claim to be the Son of God, had Him crucified and exposed to public shame. Those who repudiate the salvation procured by Christ will find none anywhere else.

Thus, Bruce agrees with this book that “impossible” means impossible, and that those who fall away will never be restored.

B. Other passages and once-for-all salvation

While Hebrews offers the fullest discussion of this doctrine, other passages support this conclusion. For example, 2 Peter 2:20-22 teaches,

If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: “A dog returns to its vomit,” and, “A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud.”

If the people Peter is discussing were lost, and then saved, and then lost again, how could they be worse off than they were before being saved? What is worse than being lost? If they could return to a saved state, aren't they far better off than if they had never heard the gospel and had no chance for salvation? If they could have been restored and saved again, they would at least have had the advantage of having heard the gospel—an advantage not enjoyed by many lost souls. The natural interpretation of the passage is that these people were worse off because they could never be saved again.

In 1 John 5:16-18, John writes of “a sin that leads to death.”

If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death. We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.

This passage is hardly consistent with the notion that Christians frequently flit back and forth between saved and unsaved states. After all, John tells us to pray for the brother who commits a sin that does not lead to death, but he says that there is no need to pray for the sin of the brother that does lead to death. “Death” must be permanent, so that prayer would be futile.

Christians do not “continue to sin”—or more precisely, “sin continuously.” Because they are penitent, they are kept safe from Satan. But Christians who continually sin are led to death. They are no longer “born of God.”

Paul teaches Timothy of people in a similar situation—

(1 Tim. 4:1-2) The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.

The point is that once seared with a hot iron, the feeling is gone and can never return. Hence, these men who left the faith cannot be redeemed.

In a related passage, Jesus speaks of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

(Matt. 12:22-32) Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David?”

But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.”

Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

“Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house.

“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and falling away as described in Hebrews 6:4-6 have many similarities. The essence of “falling away” includes having “shared in the Holy Spirit” and

rejecting Jesus despite the Holy Spirit's work. Blasphemy also involves rejection of the work of the Holy Spirit. Confessing the name of Jesus, accepting the blessings of the gift of his Spirit, and then rejecting the work of his Spirit and Jesus' Lordship is tantamount to blasphemy.

The difficulties of this passage are great, but it is quite clear that there is an unforgivable sin, such that one may become beyond redemption. It would be peculiar indeed to believe that God would not forgive this sin even if the sinner were to repent and beg forgiveness. Thus, the sin must be of a nature where the sinner will never repent. The likeliest interpretation is that the unforgivable sin is the rejection of the working of the Holy Spirit, the common theme of this passage and Hebrews 6:4-6.

These other passages support the teachings I find in Hebrews. And these passages are not easily reconciled with the notion that a Christian can lose his soul and then regain it.

C. We are perfect forever!

Some time after camp was over, the question of salvation came up in Sunday School class. The teacher asked what we had to do to be saved. With appropriate Bible passages being read, we concluded the following:

- Hear.
- Believe.
- Repent.
- Confess.
- Be baptized.

I asked the teacher if you stayed saved from there on out or if the rules changed after baptism? What if you sinned? She was perplexed, having apparently never thought of this before. She said she would get back with me.

The next week she told me that the preacher suggested adding one more point:

- Live a faithful life.

This filled in the gap, but my classmates and I wanted to know what this meant. How many times could I forget to take out the garbage and still be saved? How many times could I fight with my two crabby older sisters and still be saved? What if they were really asking for it?

She paused and then explained that God has a Book of Life. He keeps records of sins committed and good deeds done. If our good deeds outweigh the bad, we go to heaven.

I pondered this. I thought of the names I had called my sisters. I thought of the fights we had had. I thought of how rarely I made up my bed. I thought of the mess I had left on the floor. I

thought of all my black, black sins. Surely God's book had pages and pages and chapters and chapters of my wickedness.

I then searched my memory for good deeds. I took out the garbage, but always had to be reminded, sometimes with a switch. My grandmother refused all efforts to let me help her cross the street.

I asked the teacher, "What if the good and bad total the same and there is a tie?" You see, I knew it would be close at best—and a tie was my best shot. I knew it would take me years to catch up to even tie. Maybe never, if I couldn't find any old ladies to help cross the road (I learned this from Cub Scouts).

She terrified me with those dreaded words: "We'll have to trust in God's mercy on that one." Oh, no! We all knew what was really meant by that!

When I first seriously studied Hebrews and was led to this (to me) very surprising conclusion, I chose to test the result by re-studying the scriptures to see if it might also be true that a Christian *stays* saved until he is lost as described in Hebrews 6 and 10. My understanding had always been that Christians could and often did lose their salvation, only to regain their salvation upon repentance, confession, and requesting forgiveness. Obviously, this teaching is entirely contradictory to my understanding of Hebrews.

If I read Hebrews correctly, then there are only two paths that a Christian can follow. Either he can become saved at baptism and remain saved until death, or he can become saved, lose his salvation, and never regain it. This would be far from "once saved, always saved," but neither would it be the traditional Church of Christ interpretation, at least as taught in my part of the country.

I should point out that when I first taught a class on Hebrews, my wife counseled me not to teach this subject. I assured her that I intended to teach the truth as I understood it no matter how controversial. She laughed and said she thought the conclusion to be too obvious to justify taking the class's time. She had always understood the Bible this way. Apparently her North Carolina Church of Christ instruction had been very different from my Alabama education.

Let's first look once again at Hebrews with this question in mind:

(Heb. 5:9) [A]nd, once **made perfect**, [Christ] became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him

(Heb. 7:28) For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been **made perfect forever**.

(Heb. 10:14) [B]ecause by one sacrifice he has **made perfect forever** those who are being made holy.

(Heb. 11:40) God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they [who were saved under the Old Law] be **made perfect**.

(Heb. 12:23b) You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men **made perfect**

These passages are the building blocks of an argument that permeates Hebrews. The writer first shows us that Jesus had to be made perfect by learning obedience (5:9). This perfection is forever (7:28). He then shows us that we Christians are also made perfect forever! (10:14)—just like Jesus. It is the very same phrase applied to Jesus. Moreover, he identifies as the people made perfect forever “those who are being made holy.” Saved people are people who are growing in holiness—in other words, people who are in fact less than perfect but who repent.

He then points out that we are saved with the Old Testament heroes described in chapter 11, who needed the blood of Jesus to be made perfect as much as do Christians (11:40). Finally, he concludes that God will judge us all, but we have no fear of judgment because we have been made perfect (12:23).

How can this view of salvation be reconciled with the idea that Christians move in and out of salvation, sometimes many times? How can I be made perfect “forever” if my salvation is temporary and uncertain?

The writer makes another argument to the same effect:

(Heb. 7:24-28) [B]ecause Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to **save completely** those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins **once for all** when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made **perfect forever**.

Here the key thoughts come together. Jesus’ priesthood is permanent. He is perfect forever. He saves completely—not day after day, but once for all! Christians also are made perfect forever, not day after day.

This thought appears many other places in the New Testament. Not surprisingly, Paul expresses it most plainly in Romans, where Paul gives his fullest explanation of grace:

(Rom. 3:27-28) Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Traditionally we have interpreted this verse as applying to baptism only. The salvation that is received at baptism is not dependent on works. And yet if our continued salvation depends on our works, then there is ample room for boasting.

Paul delves deeper into this issue—

(Rom. 4:4-8) Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. **Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.**”

Paul quotes from Psalm 32:1-2 to explain the nature of our salvation. The Christian is a man “whose sin the Lord will never count against him.” This is not only sin committed before baptism—it is *all* sin, so long as the Christian has not fallen away.

Any doubt on this point is eliminated by this passage:

(Rom. 5:5-10) And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how **much more** shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how **much more**, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

To a member of the Churches of Christ, this is possibly the most wonderful and amazing passage in the Bible. Study it closely.

We well understand that our sins are forgiven at baptism. We understand that there are no exceptions—we are washed “whiter than snow” (Isa. 1:18) and our sins are removed “as far as the east is from the west” (Psa. 103:12). We understand that sins committed before baptism will never be charged against us. Paul tells us that the amazing forgiveness we receive at baptism is received by us while we are still sinners in God’s eyes and therefore while we are enemies of God.

Paul then says that, now that we have been reconciled to God, we are no longer his enemies, and therefore we will be “much more” saved! The power of forgiveness at baptism is from the death of Jesus. Forgiveness after baptism is from the life of the resurrected Jesus, and

the forgiveness we now receive is *much more* than we received at baptism! Although I was baptized decades ago, my salvation is *more* assured today than when I first knew Jesus. This is so important Paul says it twice!

Don't you love your wife or husband more now than when you were first married? Don't you love your children now more than when they were born? Don't you love your parents now more than when you were a teenager? God's promise of salvation is much more certain now than ever!

Your initial salvation depended on your faith and repentance. You had not yet received the Holy Spirit. Your understanding was simple and shallow. But you now have the Holy Spirit dwelling in you, strengthening you. You have grown in Christ. Your continued salvation depends on your continued faith and repentance, but these are much easier for you than before you were saved. You may well need help to maintain your growth, or even your salvation, but you need never be converted again.

Not only are you closer to God, but God is closer to you. He is now your Father. The relationship is different and better. Jesus completely saves, and he saves Christians much more after baptism than through baptism. If you felt confident of your forgiveness when you emerged from the baptistry, you should be all the more confident now.

There is no room in Paul's view of salvation for moving out of and into grace. The "much more" is not just that we are saved—that was accomplished at baptism. It is that we *stay* saved—by the power of God working in us through his Holy Spirit.

This is made explicit in Romans 8:1-2:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

Verse 1 teaches that there is "no condemnation" for those in Jesus. Paul is not defining his terms—he is making the point that all Christians are completely saved all the time. A Christian who is not saved is no longer a Christian. There are no lost Christians.

(Rom. 8:3-4) For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

The requirements of the law (the will of God) are fully met in us. Not just on our good days, but always. Forever. But if this gift is limited to those who live "according to the Spirit," who is Paul talking about?

(Rom. 8:5-9) Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of

sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.

All Christians live according to the Spirit. All the time. Paul tells us by inspiration that if the Spirit lives in us, we are controlled by the Spirit. If not, we are not even saved!

(Rom. 8:10-11) But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

But the indwelling Spirit guarantees your salvation, for just as long as he is living in you. The Spirit doesn't come and go, and neither does your salvation. When the Spirit leaves, you are no longer saved. But until you quench the Spirit by hardening your heart to the point of no longer being able to repent, you are saved. You are perfect forever, once for all.

(Rom. 8:12-14) Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

For the saved person, the Spirit is active and effective. The Spirit motivates the Christian to “put to death the misdeeds of the body,” that is, to be penitent or to accept Jesus as Lord. All Christians do this, because all Christians possess the Holy Spirit.

The same point is made in Hebrews 8, although the role of the Holy Spirit is seen only by inference:

(Heb. 8:10-12) “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

What does God mean when he says that the new covenant will be different from the old covenant, because in the new covenant God will write his laws in his people's minds and hearts? Didn't the Jews know the Law of Moses? Weren't they very diligent scholars indeed? There may have been times when the Jews' understanding of scripture was less than the understanding that Christians now have, but if this is the distinction, then the distinction would lie in the efforts of the saved, not the efforts of God—and the difference is clearly what God will do.

The scripture is unquestionably a reference to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Jeremiah prophesies that those under the new covenant will have a special relationship with God, who will instruct them in his ways by operating directly on their minds and hearts. And he prophesies that this relationship will put God's people in a state where God will forgive their sins—their sins will be remembered “no more.”

D. More on being perfect forever

The lessons on grace found in Hebrews and Romans are taught in many other places as well. Paul teaches much the same thing in Colossians:

(Col. 1:22-23) But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

The only condition to being “holy in his sight,” “without blemish,” and “free from accusation” is that you “continue in your faith.” Clearly this passage is discussing the salvation of a Christian after baptism. What must I continue to do to continue to be saved? Continue in my faith.

In Colossians 1:4 Paul says that he had “heard of your faith in Christ Jesus,” clearly demonstrating his use of “faith” in Colossians. “Faith” as used by Paul does not mean opinions on church organization and patterns of worship. It simply means faith in Christ Jesus.

1 John contains perhaps the best known passage dealing with this issue:

(1 John 1:5-7) This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

Commentators are virtually unanimous that “purifies” in verse 7 means “continually purifies” because it translates a verb that is in the present tense in the original Greek. Unlike English, Greek also has an “aorist” tense that indicates a one-time action. If “purifies” were to refer to forgiveness occurring at particular points in time, such as only when we confess, repent, and ask for forgiveness, John would have used the aorist tense. Instead he chose a word emphasizing (unambiguously in the Greek) the constancy of salvation.

This continuous forgiveness is conditioned on our walking in the light. For many years I felt that I only was walking in the light if I was “doing my best” or showing “total commitment.” Frankly, it was hard to look myself in the mirror and convince myself that I was totally committed.

It later occurred to me that “walking in the light” must be a lower standard than total commitment or doing my best. After all, my best is perfection, which is why I stood condemned before my salvation. I struggled looking for guidance as to just what standard of conduct was required of me to stay saved. For a while I felt that I was only saved immediately after praying for forgiveness, and once I sinned again my salvation was lost until I again asked for forgiveness.

1 John answers this problem simply. We are taught that, in Jesus, “there is no darkness at all.” Therefore, if I am in Jesus (have been saved and have not fallen away) I am always walking in the light, because there is no darkness at all for me to walk in! My walking in the light is just as continuous as Jesus’ forgiveness of my sins. Why else would John tell us that there is no darkness in Jesus?

The only alternative view that is even arguably consistent with what John wrote is that to walk “as he is in the light” I must walk as Jesus walked, that is, perfectly. This would be no grace at all! We ignore John words and impose our traditions on the scripture when we interpret this passage to require us to live up to a standard higher than simple faith and repentance but lower than perfection.

John goes on to write—

(1 John 2:12) I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.

John does not say that he writes because their sins *may* have been forgiven, or that *some* of their sins have been forgiven, or that *some* Christians had their sins forgiven but some did not. He said that *all* sins of *all* Christians are forgiven. This is, of course, totally consistent with the notion that you are in Jesus until you fall away (and are therefore no longer a Christian), and that all who are in Jesus enjoy constant forgiveness of sins.

John tells us why he wrote 1 John near the end of the book:

(1 John 5:13) I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Not “whether” you have eternal life—“that” you have eternal life. The point is unambiguous. This thought is expanded in the previous chapter.

(1 John 4:13-15) We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.

The ultimate test of salvation and basis of our confidence is our receipt of the Holy Spirit (amply evidenced by our baptism and continued repentance) and our continued faith in Jesus. Repentance will evidence itself in righteous living, but the repentance is the key—righteous living only matters to the extent it evidences submission to Jesus as Lord.

(1 John 3:9) No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.

We all sin, but we all have made Jesus Lord. We do not want to sin or try to sin. We put to death the misdeeds of our bodies, by growing and maturing as Christians. And so long as his Spirit lives in us, we are all saved, all the time.

E. More of Hebrews' teachings on our assured salvation

Two other passages from Hebrews reinforce this conclusion:

(Heb. 4:16) Let us then approach the throne of grace with **confidence**, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

(Heb. 10:19,22) Therefore, brothers, since we have **confidence** to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in **full assurance** of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

It is possible for all Christians to be confident in their salvation. This should be normal. It has nothing to do with boasting, because our confidence is in the blood of Jesus. We are not worried about whether our sins are forgiven, because we know that God cleansed "us from a guilty conscience" when we were baptized. We need no further act of grace. The gifts we received at baptism (our relationship with Christ, the Holy Spirit, etc.) are entirely sufficient. Our conscience should be no more guilty today than it was when we came out of the waters of baptism.

Discussion Questions:

1. What have you been taught regarding how to stay saved? What have you been taught is the rule as to when you fall away?
2. Is it appropriate to describe salvation in terms of a personal relationship with Jesus?
3. Can a Christian fall away and yet be capable of repenting?
4. Can you be penitent and not have faith?
5. What could happen to cause a Christian to fall away? How can we help other Christians not fall away?
6. How does it make you feel to know that your salvation is "once for all" and that you are "made perfect forever"?
7. Do you know any Christians who struggle to feel saved or who feel unforgiven?
8. Is it dangerous to teach such a view of grace?

Chapter 6

Grace—A Sure Election

Fortunately, by junior high I had solved the forgiveness problem. I finally learned “grace.” It seems that all my sins (including lust, an ever-increasing problem at that time) would be forgiven by this formula:

- Repent. But if you keep doing it, you haven’t repented.
- Confess. But *if* the sin is public, you must confess publicly or it doesn’t count. And you must know that you sinned, or how could you confess it?
- Ask God for forgiveness.

Death continued to be a constant threat. If I sinned, I knew I stood damned before God until I could beg forgiveness. Therefore, throughout the day, I would pause, close my eyes (prayers didn’t count unless the eyes were closed), and quickly pray for forgiveness. I wasn’t continuously saved, but I was frequently saved. I came as close to praying without ceasing as has ever been done.

A few weeks later, my mother approached me. With her most delicate voice, she said she wondered why I frequently stopped dead in my tracks and closed my eyes. I explained my understanding of grace. She was dearly relieved, because she and my father thought I might have epilepsy! She encouraged me to continue my dedicated prayer life, but suggested I do it with my eyes open so I wouldn’t be as prone to accidents.

Although we have been made perfect forever, our forever-perfection has some limits. 2 Peter 1:5-11 teaches that some, but not all, Christians will “never fall.”

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities **in increasing measure**, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to **make your calling and election sure**. For if you do these things, **you will never fall**, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Peter urges his readers to grow in Christ by adding these Christian virtues to their character. He counsels us that we should possess these qualities in increasing measure. The test of effective Christian living is not how good you are, but how much you are growing in goodness! Resting on your laurels is a very dangerous condition indeed. Peter says that if we do

these things (grow in these characteristics) we “will never fall.” In fact, we will make our “calling and election sure.”

Obviously, some Christians have a sure calling and election and some do not. Some Christians will never fall, and some might fall. Christians who grow (that is, who are penitent, who put to death the misdeeds of the body, who do what God wills) never fall. Such people remain as saved throughout their Christian lives as the moment they were baptized—in fact, they are much more saved.

Christians who refuse to grow, who rest on God’s grace, and who resist the pleadings of his Spirit may fall and their salvation is unsure. They are in danger. Their sins may well lead to death.

Clearly we should make every effort to encourage such a person and steer him away from this risky course. Clearly, no one can remain in this dangerous situation forever. Eventually the Spirit either will become effective or will depart.

Thus, the Hebrews writer tells us,

(Heb. 10:24-25) And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

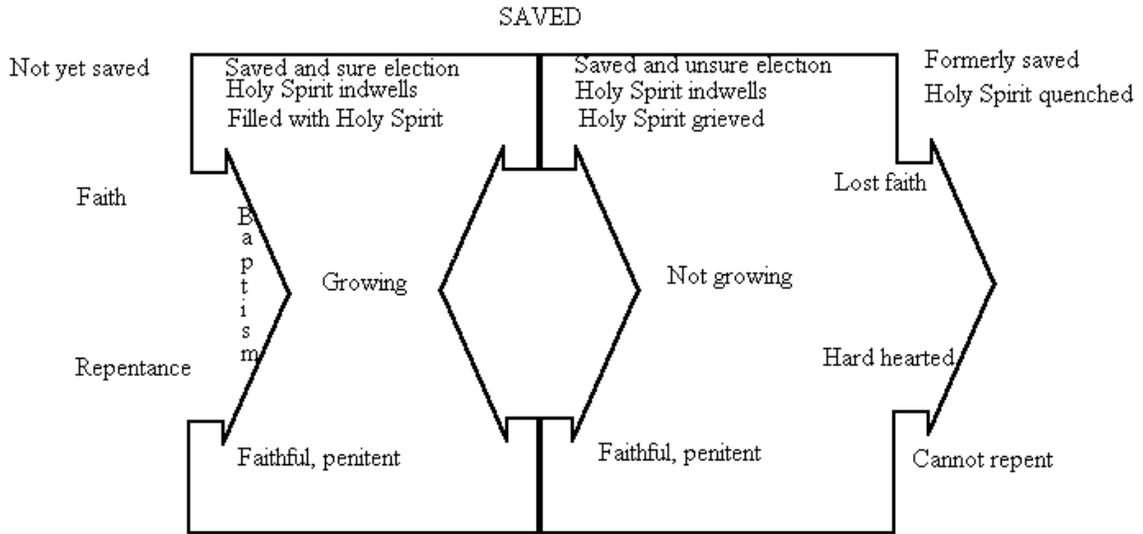
He also tells us,

(Heb. 3:13) But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.

One reason we are to assemble is so that those who are strong may encourage the weak. It can be deceptively easy for an immature Christian to fall back and fail to live a penitent life. He stops growing, and soon loses much of the Spirituality he had attained. Eventually he no longer is concerned with Jesus’ will—only his own. If Jesus is no longer his Lord, he no longer has any reason to repent. Ultimately, the Spirit gives up, and his dangerous condition becomes a fatal condition.

A. Summary

This chart (Figure 6.1) describes how I see a Christian’s salvation. Those outside the box are outside Jesus and unsaved. Those inside the box are saved.



Those who have never been saved are on the left side. If they accept Jesus as the Son of God and as Lord, they will be saved and receive the Holy Spirit when they are baptized.

So long as they are faithful and penitent, they will be saved forever and will possess the Spirit and all its blessings. But you cannot be faithful and penitent and not grow. A penitent person grows in his relationship with Jesus and matures as a Christian. He develops a more Christ-like character.

A Christian who does not grow has a problem with his penitence. How can you let Jesus be Lord and not mature? Obviously, we all have times when we backslide and don't grow, and even fall back, and such times do not put us out of Christ.

But our election ceases to be sure. We are in serious danger, but not yet lost. But there will come a time when a lack of penitence ultimately creates a hard heart.

After a while, a heart that doesn't repent, can't repent. Thus, the arrow in the middle of the box points two ways. The certainty of your election can come and go. An uncertain election is nonetheless an election, but a very dangerous one.

If you lose your faith or your willingness to make Jesus Lord, and if the Spirit has been quenched by you because you refuse to respond to it, you pass through the arrow on the right, and your new condition is worse than your first. You are lost and don't care. You just don't care about Jesus or his commands, and so you will never return to the Lord.

This condition is reserved for the hard-hearted—people who have once been tender-hearted enough to be saved but who have chosen to reject Jesus despite having been saved and having received all the blessings that come with salvation.

The scary thing is that the disease, hard-heartedness, makes it hard for the falling Christian to notice his problem or to care that he has a problem. Once you begin down this

slippery slope, it is very hard indeed to help yourself. Therefore, the early help and intervention of your Christian brothers and sisters is critical.

B. We are more sinful than we realize

My wife and I had just moved to a new city and were looking for a new Church home. One night, we visited a congregation when the preacher spoke on sin. He concluded his sermon, "I don't see why we act as though sin is inevitable. I realize that we will never be perfect, but we ought to be able to avoid sinning at least some of the time—a day or even a week! In fact, right here and now, I'm challenging every one of us, myself included, to live the next seven days without sinning once!"

He looked at his audience and saw several skeptical faces. "Just try it. See how long you can go without sinning. And if you mess up and commit a sin, try to break your old record starting right there!"

A week later the preacher called his students to account. "How many made it at least one day?" Several raised their hands, but many did not.

A member spoke up, "How many didn't even make it home without sinning?" Several hands shot up to gales of laughter.

The preacher continued. "Two days." Some hands went down. "Three days." More hands dropped. After the preacher got to "Five days," only the preacher held his hand up. On "Six days," even he dropped his hand and none remained.

He confessed, "Coming home from work on Tuesday I thought I was going to make it. But I got tied up in traffic. I needed to change lanes to make my exit, and a fellow cut me off. I had to take the next exit, and it cost me half an hour. I was furious. I blew my horn. And I thought some things that I should not have thought. I don't lose my temper often, but I really hate to be cut off like that." The church roared with laughter. The thought of their preacher red-faced with anger on the Interstate was totally out of character.

Several members elbowed their neighbors and whispered, "He could've shot that other driver, and it wouldn't have been a sin!"

One of the most revealing things that I have learned from teaching this material is that, as a group, we in the Churches of Christ have a very narrow view of what sin is. We define sin so narrowly that some of us actually believe that we can go days without sinning. But sin is much broader than losing your temper or saying bad words. Much broader indeed.

Jesus was confronted with a man with exactly this narrow view of sin (the same as the preacher in my true story):

(Luke 18:18-27) A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother:’”

“All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said.

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?”

Jesus replied, “What is impossible with men is possible with God.”

The ruler believed that he had kept the Ten Commandments from his youth. Remarkably, Jesus never challenged his claim. Rather, Jesus showed him that “[n]o one is good except God alone.” Jesus’ point is that even if you do indeed keep the Ten Commandments for your entire life, you are neither “good” nor sinless. This is so because each one of us fails to attain the level of goodness that Jesus attained, and anything less than as-good-as-Jesus is sin.

(Phil. 2:5-7) **Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:** Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

(1 Tim. 1:15-16) Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.** But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited **patience as an example for those who would believe on him** and receive eternal life.

(1 Pet. 2:21-22) To this you were called, because **Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.** “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

(1 John 2:6) Whoever claims to live in him must **walk as Jesus did.**

We all have something in our lives that is more important to us than living for God. Jesus put his finger on the ruler’s sinful priority—his love of money. But the lesson is not ultimately about money—it is about putting Jesus first and the fact that we all fail to do so!

Jesus makes the incredible (to us) statement that it is impossible for a rich man to be saved. Some have tried to blunt the force of this plain statement by arguing that the “eye of a

needle” refers to a hole in a city wall that a camel can pass through only on its knees. As appealing as this thought is to us, later scholarship has shown that this use of the term was unheard of in Palestine during Jesus’ time, so that this more comfortable meaning must be rejected.

The solution to the ruler’s problem is found in Jesus’ conclusion, “What is impossible with men is possible with God.” The rich cannot merit salvation. It is impossible for them to justify themselves or live sinlessly. But God can and does save those who don’t deserve it, the rich included.

But Jesus’ point is found in his first statement: “No one is good—except God alone.” No one, rich or poor, can be saved on his own merits, even someone who never violated the Ten Commandments. Being sinless is much more than not breaking laws. It is also the state of your heart. Who comes first? And none of us can pass this test!

Had someone else come to Jesus with the same question, Jesus may have asked him to give up his wife, or his children, or his reputation, or his health, or his job. Jesus would have found something inside this “sinless” man that did not measure up. No one is good—except God.

I have learned much about how our traditional teachings have affected our members from classes that I have taught regarding our own sinfulness. A typical class will go like this:

When we criticize the other church, the one down the road, for sin, shouldn't we recognize that although they are sinners, we are too? Aren't we all sinners?

The class stares blankly with that “this does not compute” kind of look.

Who in this room is not a sinner?

The teacher waits for a painfully long time. One member of the class eventually speaks up. “Speak for yourself. We don’t think of ourselves as sinners. At least not in the same sense as the other churches that we’re talking about.”

Well, what does the Bible say? Why do we need grace if we don't sin?

“We have all sinned and ‘fallen short of the glory of God: like the Bible says. But we’re not ‘sinners: We sin only occasionally or accidentally.” The class period ends before the class can reach a consensus. Clearly, the class members believe that their sins are minor and readily forgiven while the sins of others are outside the power of God to forgive.

The above example may seem severe, but I’ve had it happen in several classes that I thought were way too mature to harbor such arrogance. In fact, it happened again the Sunday after I wrote this example.

It was some time before I came to realize why so many of us take such a narrow view of sin. We take such a limited view of grace, doling it out in such tiny quantities, that we could not

live with ourselves if we understood how sinful we are. Our traditional understanding of grace would not cover our sins, if we really understood just how sinful we are in the eyes of God. Therefore, we have redefined sin to be narrow enough so that our limited, narrow view of grace will become broad enough to cover our narrowly redefined sins.

However, we have many members who are more sensitive to their sinfulness. These members never feel saved, because the doctrine of grace they have been taught is not broad enough to cover the sins that they well know they have committed. For the rest of us, because we must see only a few of our own sins to feel saved, a limited view of grace leads to self-satisfaction, legalism, and arrogance.

This leads to the following parable:

The preacher was pleased with himself. The congregation had obviously enjoyed his lesson on sin and had clearly learned from it. He was also glad that he had been able to honestly report that he had made it six days without sin. He would have been very embarrassed to have reported anything less.

But before he could continue his lesson, he was overcome by a brilliant light and overwhelming noise. The light was so bright that he could scarcely look ahead. For a moment he thought that he saw the features of a man, but the light was too bright to permit him to make out any details, and soon he had to look away for fear of being blinded. The sound seemed like a waterfall or, more exactly, rushing waters. But soon he realized that it was the sound of a voice. And he was very afraid.

Do not be afraid.

The voice spoke firmly.

I am the angel of the Lord. This is what the Lord says:

The preacher instantly recalled the many visits of the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament. He knew that many had speculated that the angel of the Lord was in fact Jesus himself. For a moment he considered asking the angel to give a sign that he is indeed from God, but he recalled the fate of Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, when he made the same mistake. The preacher decided that he had already seen enough signs to be convinced. He did not know how to react to an angelic being, and so he decided to follow Mary's example. "I am the Lord's servant," he said.

You are an unworthy servant.

"No, Lord. I have worked many years as your minister. I have baptized many in your name. I have given up much to be a preacher of your Word."

You are an unworthy servant. Have you not read the scripture? It is written, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"

“Yes, Lord. I have only done my duty”

No. You have not even done that. You dare to tell my flock that you have not sinned these last six days. You would let them leave your presence convinced that they very nearly deserve the salvation that I am giving them! Do your duty and feed my sheep.

“But, Lord, I have tried to teach them about your Word.”

At this point the impatience of the heavenly being was clearly turning to anger. The bright light burned the preacher’s eyes even as he buried his face in his hands. With a fury beyond imagining, the being spoke:

While you were being “sinless” for six days, 100 souls died in your city and were lost for eternity.

While you slept with your wife, 10 homeless people died from the cold.

While you read your newspaper, 100 men and women were denied jobs because they could not read.

While you planned a beach trip for your teenagers, five programs that would have fed, housed, or clothed the poor of your city failed and were canceled for lack of volunteers.

While you attended a party for your Sunday School class, 10 elderly women died because they could not afford their medicine.

While you played with your children, 20 babies went through crack withdrawal and died.

“But, Lord, it is too much! I can’t solve all these problems! I must give some time to my family and friends! I can’t work all the time!”

How many members does your congregation have?

The preacher gave a number.

If they were all working to care for those in need, would it make a difference?

“Yes, Lord.”

Who is in a better position than you to lead them into a life of service?

“No one, Lord.”

Preacher! This is what the Lord says:

It is too much for one man, or even one thousand men. But why don’t you care that it is too much? Is that a reason to do nothing? And why do you feel worthy of my salvation while my children are living and dying in misery? When you have done all that you can do—all that you

can do—you will not merit my salvation. You will be an unprofitable servant and a sinner. But you will perhaps have some appreciation for what I have done for you.

“But, Lord, they are not ready.”

Preacher! I have been dead nearly 2,000 years! I raised up the leaders of the Restoration Movement over 150 years ago! Your congregation was established over 75 years ago! Many of your members have been Christians for over 50 years! How much time do you need?

The preacher bowed his head silently. He could not imagine what had possessed him to dare to contradict the Lord himself.

Preacher! Were you sinless for the last six days?”

No, Lord. I have been called to honor your name by works of service. As a minister of the gospel I have been called especially to help others to fulfill their calling as your servants. I have failed you, Lord, and failed miserably. Please be merciful to me, a sinner.”

You have my mercy and my help to do all that it is your duty to do.

Suddenly the light went out and the sound hushed. The preacher looked up at his congregation and wondered how they would react to the vision that had appeared. But they were still laughing at his story. He could still hear the echo of his last few words in the auditorium. No time had passed at all! No one had seen what he had seen! He paused and tearfully eyed his audience.

“Brothers and sisters, we are all sinners. Every day. Every hour. Every one of us. We are saved only by God’s grace. We may never fully understand how great it is, because we may never be able to admit to ourselves how very sinful we are in his eyes. But this much I know. We need to change. We need to repent. But first we need to understand how very badly we need God and his grace and learn to be deeply grateful for what he has done for us.

“I lied to you earlier. I didn’t go six days without sinning. I didn’t even make it home. None of us did. We left church with too many things left undone to count ourselves sinless. We have a lot to do, and it’s best that we start right now.”

Readers, we commit sins of “commission” and “omission.” You all knew that before you began reading this book. Sins of commission occur at particular times, but sins of omission occur continuously. When do you become guilty of not evangelizing as you should? Not being the leader that you should? Not loving as you should? All the time. If you pray for forgiveness of sins of this nature and are forgiven, you become instantly guilty once you’ve said “Amen” unless you immediately begin living to Jesus’ standards. None of us ever do, and so we all continually sin. Therefore, we must have continuous forgiveness. Nothing else will ever leave us saved for longer than we can word a prayer.

C. The dangers of cheap grace

When I first began thinking in these terms, I became concerned that teaching such a broad, liberating view of grace would be dangerous. Many Christians might be tempted to take advantage of this grace by sinning. There are sufficient arguments to the contrary, however.

We must teach the truth as written. No one of us is wise enough to decide to toughen or edit God's Word. What greater sin could a man commit than to mislead God's people about his Word because the man is so arrogant that he thinks he is wiser than God and knows better than God what to tell his children?

Correctly understood, there is no room for tolerance of cheap grace. The warnings in Hebrews ought to be preached and preached again. The Hebrews writer repeatedly warns against falling away, following each assurance of salvation with a warning. We have failed to teach these scriptural warnings because we wrongly believed that falling away was a common but normally temporary problem. As awful as these passages are to read, they are infinitely worse to the ears of the Christian who believes he falls away easily.

Falling away seemed so easy to us that we assumed that being "restored" must also be easy. But the preaching of a cheap and ready restoration is completely un-Biblical. Go back and review the discussion on the bitter root in Hebrews 12 and Deuteronomy 28. The Lord tells us plainly that if we deliberately continue to sin in reliance on his grace, we will lose his grace—and lose it forever. Only a fool would dare ignore this warning.

The example of the Baptists is significant. These believers are largely persuaded that they cannot lose their salvation under *any* circumstance. Certainly, if anyone among the Protestant churches would be tempted to sin in reliance on grace, it would be the Baptists. And yet, while they are not perfect (and neither are we), as a group they are remarkably devout, are faithful in their attendance, work hard in their programs, diligently tithe, and dedicate themselves to evangelism. Obviously the Baptists' belief in "once saved, always saved" has not prevented their members from leading penitent lives.

D. Judging

This leads us to a very important observation: Only God knows when a Christian's heart is so hard that he cannot repent. We can often judge when a Christian may have slipped from a sure calling and election, and this means we need to encourage this brother to rededicate his life to Jesus, but we can never know whether he is capable of repenting.

Another observation is pertinent. The fact that God forgives a sin does not mean that he condones the sin. He forgave David for murder and adultery, but no one could conclude that murder and adultery are acceptable conduct for a Christian (or even a king). Just so, when we recognize that our brother is saved despite his sins, we do not condone his sins. Letting a sinner attend church or cooperating with a church with sinful members is inevitable. After all, we all sin. All church members are sinners. Who are we to declare that some sins are tolerable but other sins (other than rejection of Jesus) by Christians are not?

If God accepts the Christian, we must do so also, but we do not thereby approve of the sin. We continue to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). We do not compromise our beliefs. Fellowship and acceptance are built on grace despite sin, not on compromise or soft-pedaling the truth. We must learn to disagree—and even to debate our disagreements vigorously—without condemning to hell all those who disagree with us on any point we happen to feel strongly about.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the possible views on whether a Christian can be lost again and then saved again? What passages support and contradict these possible views?
2. Which of these views are consistent with Romans 8's teachings on who has the Holy Spirit?
3. Which of these views permit all Christians to be continuously forgiven? Which of these views permit Christians to be confident and assured while relying only on God's grace?
4. Which of these views allows a Christian to lose his soul as described in Hebrews 10?
5. Have you ever had trouble accepting God's forgiveness? What made it hard to accept?
6. Are there unsaved Christians? Does a lost Christian have a superior ability to regain salvation than someone who has never been saved? How does 2 Peter 2:20-22 apply to these questions?

Chapter 7

Grace—Objections

In my teaching of these materials, students frequently raise a number of scriptural objections. The following are the most serious objections that I have heard.

A. 1 John 1:9

Immediately after promising the continuous forgiveness of sins in 1 John 1:7, John addresses the need for Christians to “confess” sins:

(1 John 1:8-10) If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. **If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.** If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

Verse 9 seems to make God’s forgiveness of our sins conditional on our confessing our sins. But how can we enjoy the continuous forgiveness of sins promised in other verses when this verse indicates that our sins remain unforgiven (and thus we are not in a saved condition) until we have confessed each sin? What if we are unaware that we have sinned? What if we thought our behavior was acceptable to God, but we misunderstood his will? How can you confess a sin that you are unaware of? If God’s grace covers such sins, then why confess sins? Are we really lost after every sin until we remember the sin, repent of it, confess it, and ask for forgiveness? Who could ever be saved if this is true?

As a preliminary answer, look at Romans 8:26—

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

Surely any inadequacies that we may have in timely confessing our sins will be cured by the Holy Spirit’s intercession for us.

A more complete answer is found by looking at the word translated “confess” in verse 9—*homologeō*. The following is every verse that uses *homologeō* in the New Testament:

(Matt. 7:23) “Then I will **tell** them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

(Matt. 10:32) “Whoever **acknowledges** me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.”

(Matt. 14:7) “... that he **promised** with an oath to give her whatever she asked.”

(Luke 12:8) “I tell you, whoever **acknowledges** me before men, the Son of Man will also **acknowledge** him before the angels of God.”

(John 1:20) He did not fail to **confess**, but **confessed** freely, "I am not the Christ."

(John 9:22) His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who **acknowledged** that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue.

(John 12:42) Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not **confess** their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue;

(Acts 23:8) (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees **acknowledge** them all.)

(Acts 24:14a) However, I **admit** that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect.

(Rom, 10:9-10) That if you **confess** with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you **confess** and are saved.

(1 Tim. 6:12) Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good **confession** in the presence of many witnesses.

(Titus 1:16) They **claim** to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.

(Heb. 11:13) All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they **admitted** that they were aliens and strangers on earth.

(Heb. 13:15) Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise the fruit of lips that **confess** his name.

(1 John 1:9) If we **confess** our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

(1 John 4:2-3) This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that **acknowledges** that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not **acknowledge** Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

(1 John 4:15) If anyone **acknowledges** that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.

(2 John 1:7) Many deceivers, who do not **acknowledge** Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.

Notice that *homologeō* is translated “admit” or “acknowledge” in most cases. It is translated “confess” when used of confessing faith in Jesus, but only in 1 John is the word used in the sense of confessing sin. In fact, when one confesses his faith in Jesus, he is simply acknowledging or admitting his faith, and the word could just as well have been translated “admit.” Notice also that in every other place in 1 John or 2 John the word is translated “acknowledge.”

Now notice the verses immediately before and after 1 John 1:9.

8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

Verse 8 criticizes those who claim to be without sin. Verse 10 criticizes those who claim not to have sinned. In this context, what word would you expect to find in the blank in verse 9? Obviously, either “admit” or “acknowledge.” If you were a Greek scholar and knew that *homologeō* is normally translated “admit” or “acknowledge” except when used of confessing faith in Christ, what translation would you select?

Obviously, the opposite of claiming to be without sin is admitting sin. Verse 9 is clearly intended to be the opposite of verses 8 and 10. The correct translation is “acknowledge,” not “confess.”

The problem arises from the fact that to modern ears “confess” carries 2,000 years of religious baggage—primarily the Catholic confessional. When we hear “confess,” we are reminded of individuals confessing their sins to their priest as a condition to forgiveness, as taught by the Catholic church for centuries. But the word chosen by John carried none of these thoughts when he wrote it. It just meant “acknowledge” or “admit.” It was not a specially understood, technical religious term in the Greek, or he wouldn’t have used the same word elsewhere in the book as he did.

John’s thought is simply that denying that you sin is lying and un-Christian. Admitting your sins, and thereby relying on God’s grace, allows his grace to operate. How can you repent if you don’t think you sin? He does not teach that each and every sin is unforgiven until specifically confessed.

The only verse other than 1 John 1:9 that deals with Christians “confessing” sins is James 5:16, which doesn’t deal with confessing sins to God, but to one another.

(James 5:16) Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

While opinions differ, this passage doesn't deal with confessing sins to God as a condition to forgiveness. Rather, it's about Christians having the kind of openness that allows them to comfort, counsel, encourage, and pray for one another. But this has nothing to do with "going forward" as a condition to forgiveness. Rather, it's about the strength that comes from being so close to one another you aren't ashamed to share your weaknesses and ask for help.

Isn't it amazing that we have a very definite belief that we Christians must confess our sins one-by-one for them to be forgiven, and yet there are no verses in the Bible that teach this doctrine? Wouldn't it be surprising that such an important teaching would appear only in 1 John 1:9? How could it be that a Christian could read Romans, the Gospels, and all other books of the New Testament and fail to know how to attain forgiveness of his sins, if he overlooked this one verse?

On the other hand, penitence, which is what is truly taught in 1 John 1:9 (among many other verses), does require that we be aware of our sinful state and that we closely examine our own lives for any sin, so that we can work, with the Spirit's help, to rid ourselves of that sin. We must be brutally honest in self-examination so that we put to death the weaknesses of the flesh, and thus we must admit our sins.

But the Bible lends no support for the view that sins are unforgiven by God until we pronounce a specific confession for a specific sin, and then only if we ask for forgiveness of sins.

B. The Lord's Prayer

At this point, one of my students will inevitably remind me of the Lord's Prayer (or The Model Prayer), contained in Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount:

(Matt. 6:12-15) "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

Certainly, Jesus taught his disciples to pray for forgiveness of sins. Should we also pray for forgiveness? And if we don't, does God withhold forgiveness? What is our condition if we commit a sin and die before we remember to ask for forgiveness?

While these are entirely valid questions, I am also concerned with another question that my students never ask: what if we don't forgive those who sin against us? Jesus plainly says that if we fail to forgive others, God will not forgive us. Does this mean that we fall away while we hold anything against someone else? Jesus repeats his thought in Luke:

(Luke 6:37) "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."

Matthew's account says much the same thing:

(Matt. 7:1-2) “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

Once again, we must ask the question, what if I condemn someone? Or judge someone? Or what if I fail to forgive someone? Am I damned? And who can honestly say that he has forgiven everyone who ever sinned against him and has never condemned or judged someone?

Don't we all carry around grudges and recriminations for wrongs done to us? Have you ever forgotten a painful sin against you and then been reminded of it unexpectedly, only to find yourself still angry and resentful—much to your own surprise? You thought you had put the matter in your past, but the unexpected reminder brought hurt and the anger to the surface that you didn't realize were still there, waiting to be recalled? Does this mean that God hasn't been forgiving your sins since you failed to deal with this matter?

The even deeper problem is reconciling these questions with the New Testament's descriptions of God's grace. Paul tells us in Romans that our salvation is not based on our own efforts:

(Rom 3:27-28) Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

If our salvation depends on how well we forgive others and how well we resist judging and condemning others, we are all in very serious trouble! But Paul assures us that our salvation does not hinge on our own efforts, or else we could boast, and boasting is excluded. If our salvation depends on how well we forgive and resist condemning and judging, we would indeed have something to boast of—if we should be lucky enough to die at a moment when we are guilty of none of these things.

The true interpretation of the Lord's Prayer may perhaps be best seen through one of Jesus' parables, the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant:

(Matt. 18:23-35) “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me; he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything. The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denar². He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant, he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

Plainly, this parable gives a more thorough explanation of exactly the same command as that found in the Lord’s Prayer and in Luke’s Sermon on the Mount. What does this passage mean?

I believe that the point is not just forgiveness—it is repentance. God grants us forgiveness and therefore he expects us to forgive others. Forgiveness is hardly all that God has given us, however. God has also given us instruction, comfort, strength, and the gifts we need to do his will. Therefore, we are duty bound not only to forgive others, but also to instruct, comfort, strengthen, and give gifts to others. In fact, our Lord has given us much more than even these things. He gave his life! We must then give our lives away as well, or we violate the Lord’s teachings (as well as Romans 12:1-2) and are ungrateful. This lesson on gratitude cannot be limited to just forgiveness, because we must be grateful for all that God has done for us.

So what happens if we fail to do these things (and, of course, we all fail)? I see two ways of interpreting the Lord’s Prayer and Luke’s Sermon on the Mount.

First, we can take these statements, that if we don’t forgive we will not be forgiven, to be a simply-stated version of the requirement that all Christians must be penitent and that our continued salvation is conditioned on our continued repentance, with forgiving, judging, and condemning being illustrative of the general principle.

Second, we can take these to be statements of the law of God as it applies to those outside of grace. Many commentators believe that the point of many of Jesus’ teachings, including especially the Sermon on the Mount, was for Jesus to convict his listeners of their sins, and therefore their need for grace. He was not preaching the grace that was to come so much as the damnation that they needed to escape. His lessons in this vein were intended to be harsh, to compel the Jewish people to understand that they could not stand justified by their works and that they needed a Savior! The point of these statements, then, is that we can never merit salvation because we never forgive perfectly and we will inevitably judge and condemn others.

This is precisely the point Paul makes in Romans 2:1-4:

(Rom 2:1-4) You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same

things. ... So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?

But Paul is explicitly dealing with those not under grace, to prove that we all need Jesus' sacrifice to be saved (Rom. 3:23-24).

This does not mean that the lessons taught by Jesus are not applicable today. Certainly they are. We are under the same requirement to forgive and not judge and not condemn as the Jews were when Jesus actually uttered these words. The only difference is that the penalty for failing is now very different. If we violate his teachings, we will have sinned, but will be forgiven so long as we are penitent and continue in our faith.

And this is precisely the result that Jesus was leading to in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. In both the Lord's Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount, we are required to forgive to be forgiven. This conclusion is plain in both the English and the Greek. In fact, the Lord's Prayer can be translated as requiring that God's forgiveness be in proportion to our forgiveness of others! The same thought is found in Matthew 7:1-2 when Jesus says that his listeners will be forgiven "with the same measure" that they use to forgive others.

But in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, the servant was *first* forgiven, and then expected to show his gratitude by forgiving others on a much smaller scale than the King's forgiveness. This is the notion of a Christian's forgiveness. In both passages, failure to forgive is a sin, but the relationship to God is very different indeed.

Now, this brings us back to the Lord's Prayer. Do I have to pray for forgiveness to receive it? Am I condemned if I fail to pray? Only if a Christian now has to perfectly forgive all others (and perfectly not judge and not condemn) in order to be fully forgiven. If our continued salvation depends on the quality of our prayer life, it depends on our works, and this is plainly not the case.

Then why did Jesus command his disciples to pray this prayer? Because under the old covenant, continuous forgiveness through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit was not yet available (John 7:37). The commands to forgive and not to condemn or judge are eternal. The means of obtaining, and the nature of, forgiveness for violating these commands has changed.

C. Simon Magus

Acts 6 contains the story of the conversion of the Samaritans.

(Acts 8:14-24) When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

When Simon [Magus] saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me."

Peter tells Simon, "Pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart." Does this mean that whenever you or I sin we are unforgiven until we repent and ask for forgiveness, and even then, that God will only "perhaps" forgive us? Do we really believe that this is the Good News? Note these points—

First, we should not read into the passage more than is there. Peter said, "Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord." He did not say, "Pray for forgiveness." The instruction to repent and to pray is entirely sound and good advice to any convert. The difficulty is, therefore, in Peter's saying that God will "perhaps" forgive Simon.

Those who teach that salvation can be lost and regained do not believe that God will only "perhaps" forgive those who repent and ask for forgiveness. Under any view, the "perhaps" cannot be because God only perhaps forgives penitent Christians. No one teaches that.

Thus, the "perhaps" must be on Simon's side of the matter. Peter is expressing his very justified doubts that Simon is truly penitent. History may be of some benefit here. Church history tells us that Simon never returned to the church but instead became a vigorous opponent.

While Simon "believed and was baptized," he must have been an example of the "rocky soil" that Jesus spoke of in the Parable of the Sower. Peter saw through inspiration that Simon would not remain a Christian long and was urging him to get in or get out—knowing, perhaps by inspiration, that the stern rebuke would force Simon to leave the church and no longer be a wicked influence from within.

Jesus himself on occasion gave an exaggerated rebuke to test the faith of his hearers. Matthew 15:21-28 recounts the request of a Canaanite woman that Jesus heal her daughter of demon possession. Jesus said to her, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." This very stern rebuke did not deter the woman, and Jesus ultimately healed her daughter, saying, "Woman, you have great faith!" Certainly, we would not conclude from this rebuke that all Gentiles are "dogs" in the eyes of our Lord, but rather we take the rebuke as a test of faith. The Canaanite woman passed the test. Simon evidently did not.

If the gospel message is to be based on our traditional interpretation of this passage, we must teach the whole passage. We cannot pick and choose willy nilly. If this passage is to be the

basis of our doctrine of salvation, we must conclude that sins are not forgiven until repented of (specifically) and forgiveness is asked for through prayer, and that even if we do these things, God's forgiveness will only "perhaps" (and not certainly) occur.

While there would be similarities here to the traditional teaching of many Church of Christ believers, there are key distinctions from what is normally taught. We believe that God hears our prayers and truly forgives those who repent. While we may "perhaps" repent, God does not "perhaps" forgive. He forgives. Even if you believe that this passage does not support the interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6 and chapters 9 and 10 that I am arguing for, it does not support any alternative view of scripture that I've ever heard.

Nowhere else does the Bible make a prayer requesting forgiveness a condition to the forgiveness of a Christian. Certainly nowhere else does the Bible suggest that a Christian who repents and prays for forgiveness will only "perhaps" be forgiven. If either of these ideas is the truth, why is the rest of the New Testament strangely silent on this critical doctrine?

Consider Galatians 2:

(Gal. 2:9-14) James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

Thus, even late in his ministry, Peter made mistakes that were clearly not inspired. The scriptures dealing with these matters are inspired, but the actions of the people and words said by them (while they really did and said what the scriptures say) are not necessarily inspired. Peter was not inspired when he improperly discriminated against Gentiles.

Therefore, it might be argued that Peter's comments to Simon were more the product of Peter's anger at Simon than a discourse on theology. This view may be uncomfortable to some readers. However, this is the view of J. W. McGarvey, one of the great scholars of the Restoration Movement. His commentary on Acts, published in 1863, is included as part of the Gospel Advocate commentary series that has served as a standard reference set among the Churches of Christ since its publication in 1961. McGarvey states that no definite conclusions can be drawn from this conversation. McGarvey explains Peter's comments as follows:

Nothing could be more abhorrent to the feelings of an apostle than such a proposition [by Simon Magus]. It was well calculated to arouse the impulsive spirit of Peter, and his response is marked by his characteristic vehemence. ...

Whether we are to suppose that Simon's destitute and miserable condition was the result of having forfeited the favor of God by falling into sin after his immersion, or that his confession and immersion had been insincere, so that he had never been pardoned, is not to be determined, as many suppose, by the grossness of his present conception concerning the Holy Spirit. ... That he was a believer is asserted by Luke; but whether he was to such a degree penitent as to receive pardon when he was immersed, is not certainly determined by the text. For aught that is affirmed of him, he may either have been influenced by sinister motives in confessing his faith, or have been truly penitent at the time, and afterward, and under spur of the temptation which the splendid gifts bestowed by Peter were the occasion of, have yielded to the sudden impulse of his ruling passion.

Ultimately, we must remember that it is very dangerous to too readily generalize from the accounts in Acts. After all, our Baptist friends will readily argue from Acts' account of Pentecost that the apostles did not have to be baptized to be saved and from the account of the conversion of Cornelius that he and his household received the Spirit before baptism, and therefore were saved before baptism. Our Pentecostal friends will use the story of Pentecost to argue for a tarrying meeting and will use the accounts of the Samaritans in Acts 8 and the Ephesians in Acts 19 to support their belief in tongues.

We very correctly rebut these arguments by pointing out the other scriptures, primarily in the epistles, that deal more particularly with these subjects. We warn our friends to base their beliefs on the entire Bible, not just those portions of Acts that might suit their traditions. We should take the same advice with regard to building a system of salvation based on Peter's heated comments to Simon Magus.

D. The Prodigal Son

The most commonly heard objection to the interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6 argued for in this book is the Parable of the Prodigal Son, probably our most loved parable.

(Luke 15:20-32) But while he was still a long way off his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. **For this son of mine**

was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. ...

“My son: the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because **this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.**”

Those who rely on this passage to dispute my proposed interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6 and Hebrews 9 and 10 argue that the prodigal son had been in a right relationship with the father (been saved), had lost this relationship (been lost), and then regained it (been saved again), contradicting the interpretation of various other verses offered earlier in this book. They emphasize that the father states that the prodigal son “was dead and is alive again.”

The parable is the third of three parables taught by Jesus on the following occasion:

(Luke 15:1-2) Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

The parable should thus be interpreted as relating primarily to the relationship of God to his people before the crucifixion. Much of what is said is true of our relationship with God today, but the lesson was addressed to an audience of Jews who considered themselves “righteous.”

The context makes unmistakable the lesson Jesus was teaching—that God welcomes these sinners (and would even eat with them) because the sinners are penitent (even though they were still sinners!) Moreover, those who are “righteous” tread on very thin ice indeed when they complain about God’s generosity. The parable never states the fate of the older brother, but certainly his father could not have been pleased with his attitude, representative of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees held many advantages not enjoyed by the publicans and sinners. Their wealth and families had allowed them to study the scriptures leisurely and in depth. They had easy access to the text of the Old Testament and even expertise in Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament), while Aramaic was the native tongue of Jesus’ Palestine. In fact, Paul makes much the same point in Romans, arguing that even the Jews who had rejected Jesus had been greatly blessed by God—

(Rom. 3:1-2) What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? ² Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.

(Rom. 9:3-5) For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, ⁴ the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. ⁵ Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

In short, they had not lost their inheritance, but like the older brother, they had learned nothing from it. The younger brother learned his lesson by losing his inheritance, while the older brother learned nothing by keeping it.

The inheritance is not heaven, but class status, wealth, education, and the opportunities that the Pharisees enjoyed and the “sinners” did not. To classify the inheritance as heaven or salvation would be to declare the impenitent Pharisees as just as saved as the penitent tax collectors and “sinners.” Clearly, the lesson of the parable is not that the older brother (the Pharisees) are saved.

As applied to the “sinners” Jesus ate with, God’s willingness to forgive is plainly taught. No parable better shows the heart of God. His desire to forgive, his patience with us, and his generosity are all wonderfully taught.

Also, according to the parable, when was the son forgiven by his father? Jesus tells us that the father had compassion on the son, ran to him, and kissed him *before* he confessed and declared his desire to return. This is hardly consistent with the notion that we cannot be forgiven until we have confessed, repented, and asked forgiveness.

Consider this. God knows everything—perfectly. Suppose that an immature Christian leaves the church to live a life of sin. Suppose that God knows that this young person will eventually be brought to repentance and will be dedicated to Jesus as Lord once again. And now suppose that God allows this person to die before he does repent. Will God damn him? Or will God take into account the nature of this person’s heart and his perfect knowledge of what his fate would have been had this baptized Christian had time to turn his life around?

I think that God is not bound by things that limit us. Romans 8:28-39 teaches that neither death nor time can separate from God a Christian who has not fallen away so as to be unable to repent.

Finally, the son was not literally dead. “Dead” is a figure of speech that must be interpreted in context. In each case, the father refers to the son as both “lost” and “dead.” The Jews commonly spoke in parallel figures. Hence, if we can determine the meaning of “lost,” we’ll have come close to learning the meaning of “dead.”

The parable is the third of three told by Jesus on this occasion. The first two are the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the lost sheep. In both cases, the item lost was not dead, simply in great jeopardy. The shepherd desperately sought the lost sheep because it was defenseless against the wolves—at great risk of imminent death. The woman fervently seeks her lost coin because it’s valuable and could be easily stolen and beyond recovery. Time in critical!

Hence, the metaphor “lost” doesn’t mean damned, only in great jeopardy. The prodigal son was lost and then found in the same sense as the sheep and the coin. He was in great jeopardy.

However, the father refers to the son as once “dead” and now “alive.” Of course, he wasn’t really dead, only separated from his father. The meaning is surely that he was in great jeopardy of dying but had been rescued by his repentance. After all, the point is that time

matters—saving people in jeopardy is not only proper but urgent because the passage of time may well make their rescue impossible.

As applied to Jesus' dinner companions, therefore, he is not describing the “sinners” and tax collectors as damned so much as in urgent, desperate need of rescue.

E. Handing a sinner over to Satan

1 Corinthians 5 contains a familiar passage dealing with disfellowshipping a Christian. This passage will be discussed in this connection later. However, it has occasionally been suggested to me that this passage teaches that the congregation can decree that one of its sinful members should lose his salvation in hope of his one day regaining it:

(1 Cor. 5:1-5) It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?

Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

When Paul commands the church to “hand this man over to Satan,” he is decreeing that he should be removed from the fellowship and community of Christ's church. He may no longer be an elder, deacon, teacher, or evangelist. He is to be denied the Lord's Supper and the Love Feast. (In the early church, many congregations celebrated a “love feast,” or common meal, which was sometimes combined with the Lord's Supper and sometimes used to provide food to the poor. Our present-day dinner on the grounds and other fellowship meals are very similar practices. See, for example, Jude 12.) He will no longer enjoy the benefit of the church's encouragement and exhortation, comfort and strengthening. Thus, he is to be cast out of the community of God's earthly church and left to live in Satan's realm, the world. He is to be disfellowshipped.

But the church cannot cause a man who is in grace to lose his salvation by taking a vote! What an absurd thought! His sinful nature is to be destroyed by shaming him into repentance, not by damning him.

(Rom. 8:33) Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns?

1 Corinthians 5 does not teach that a local congregation can condemn an otherwise saved person. Nor does it teach that a sinner who has been disfellowshipped is necessarily lost while out of fellowship (which would be the same thing).

F. Galatians and falling from grace

Galatians contains a passage that I long struggled to understand.

(Gal. 5:1-4) It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that **if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.** Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. **You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.**

The principles taught by Paul are plain enough. No one has the right to add to God's plan of salvation. If circumcision is required, then obedience to all the law is required. There are no half measures. If Jesus is sufficient, then the rituals of the law are not required for salvation; indeed, nothing is required other than the gospel itself. Worse yet, attempting to add to the gospel is to destroy the gospel.

Not only must we accept Jesus as the Son of God and as Lord to be saved, but we also must accept him as Savior. We must recognize that the power of salvation is from Jesus and not ourselves. When we seek to be justified by our works, either works of obedience or works of doctrine, we risk condemning ourselves because we can never meet even the standards we set. After all, the Galatians sought to add circumcision to the plan of salvation, which Paul says would destroy grace, requiring them to live perfectly.

This adds a third element to the faith-repentance requirements for salvation—reliance on Jesus as Savior. Or you might argue that reliance on Jesus as Savior is a part of faith—in accepting him as Son of God, we accept him as Savior. Certainly, we would do a better job of communicating the importance of grace and the Christ-centered nature of our salvation by including acknowledgment of Jesus as Savior in our teaching about baptism.

We are not saved by our understanding of how to worship or how to organize a church. We aren't saved by getting the name of the church right and figuring how to capitalize it. We are saved by grace, and when we add requirements to grace, we destroy grace.

This critical lesson is explained in greater depth in the author's *Do We Teach Another Gospel?*, available at <http://oneinjesus.info/files/2007/01/do-we-teach-another-gospel-full-text.pdf>.

Discussion Questions:

1. Are there any other scriptures that you think contradict the author's conclusions? Develop two arguments as to these scriptures, one contradicting the author and one consistent with the author. Which argument is stronger?
2. Why have we insisted on confession of sin as a requirement for forgiveness? Why have we done so while simultaneously teaching that forgiveness is continuous?

3. Did the Prodigal Son ask for forgiveness?
4. When did the Prodigal Son's father forgive him?
5. What does it mean to hand a sinner over to Satan?
6. What sin does Galatians condemn in the quoted passage?
7. What do we do today that is just as wrong?

Chapter 8

Grace—Wrapping up

One reason I chose to enroll in a Christian college is that I wanted to understand the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostal Movement was in full swing while I was in high school, and it greatly troubled me. While I couldn't see much point in tongue speaking and such, I also knew that the Church did not have any real explanation for the true role of the Spirit. Unfortunately, my college experience gave me only limited help in this regard.

Once I graduated, I decided that I was going to resolve this question, regardless of how hard it might be. I pulled out my concordance and read every verse in the Bible referring to the Spirit or the Holy Ghost. I used a cross-referencing Bible and read every verse cross-referenced to each of those verses. I read every verse in Nave's Topical Bible under any topic I could think of relating to the Spirit. I read commentaries and books on the Spirit. I compiled lists of verses dealing with numerous aspects of the Spirit.

After several days of solid work, with my books and notes spread out in front of me, I was ready to give up. The Pentecostals were wrong, for many reasons. But the Word-only school of thought was also plainly wrong. The Bible seemed to say that the Spirit indwelt Christians, but I couldn't figure out what difference it made. I tentatively reached the conclusion that these verses meant next to nothing, with references to the Spirit merely being high-sounding church-language for "attitude" or some such thing. But I knew that this theory didn't fit the facts very well either.

Desperate for some explanation for all that I had read, I prayed for help. While praying, I asked God for a starting point—just one or two facts about the Spirit that I could build the rest of my understanding on. It soon dawned on me that I should start with the most detailed and explicit instructions about the Spirit that we have, take the Bible's word for it that these instructions mean what they say, and then go from there. Moreover, I must read these verses with no pre-conceived notions as to what I wanted the answer to be.

Romans 8 was the obvious choice. I was flatly uncomfortable with its teachings on being "controlled" by the Spirit, but it was a lengthy, thorough discussion written in a book that is Paul's most thoroughly written explanation of the gospel. Moreover, it was written to a church that did not have special miraculous gifts. No apostle had ever been there. The lessons of Romans 8 were plainly intended to apply to all Christians, not just those with miraculous powers.

Reading Romans 8 again, I realized that it teaches that having the Holy Spirit is a characteristic of all Christians and only Christians. You cannot be saved and not have the Spirit, and you cannot have the Spirit and not be saved. This yielded this important conclusion—those who have been saved and then been lost necessarily lose (or quench) the Spirit. To be restored, they must regain the indwelling. But I had very literally read all that the Bible says about the Spirit, and nowhere is there any mention of a second indwelling. I asked myself: must a Christian who has fallen away be re-baptized? This notion is certainly foreign to the Bible. Can the restored Christian pray the Holy Spirit back into his heart? The Bible never says such a thing.

The Bible only teaches that the Spirit is received through baptism. It is very clear on this point, in fact.

Soon, I remembered Hebrews 6:4-6. I turned to this verse and read that a Christian who falls away will never be restored because he will never repent. Well, I thought, that is certainly consistent with my understanding of the Spirit, but that means that those who have fallen can never come back. What a horrible thought! But then it dawned on me: If you repent, it wasn't impossible to repent. If it wasn't impossible to repent, you never fell away. You were saved all the time! How broad God's grace must be! I was amazed. The logic was impeccable. But I could not get comfortable with the notion. The thoughts were so foreign to my training that I set these ideas aside until I could either disprove them or get more comfortable with them.

Some years later, while teaching Romans, I suggested this line of reasoning to my class as an experiment. I was still not comfortable with these conclusions, and I was hoping my class would help me make up my own mind. At first, many members of the class had a great deal of trouble with the idea. Many suggested arguments opposing this view. But as we worked through the arguments, my original idea stood firm. Soon the class was in agreement that this new view made good sense. Remarkably, as the good news settled in, many members reacted very emotionally. They had never felt truly saved until then. Traditional teaching had left them uncomfortable with their relationship with God because they were well aware of their own shortcomings (not that they were actually any more sinful than the rest of us). Others had reached the same conclusions years before but had never been able to find the convincing Biblical proof for what their hearts told them must be right.

The class members were profuse in their thanks. They wanted me to expand the lessons and teach the other classes in church. Some even urged me to write a book.

A. This material is supposed to be hard.

The lessons above will be hard for many readers to accept. They just won't seem right. The lessons will be too far outside your comfort zone. Moreover, this material is hard—so hard that even in the First Century Paul felt that it was necessary to pray for God to help his students understand his grace—through the Holy Spirit:

(Eph. 3:14-21) For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

God's grace is so wide, so long, so high, and so deep that it gives us "immeasurably more than we ask or imagine." Since we cannot even imagine the breadth of God's grace, we need special Spiritual empowerment from God to have the power "to know this love." If you find it easy to accept your understanding of grace, you have a false understanding. The Bible tells us that the truth will be hard to accept even beyond the power of mere humans to accept. And it will be hard because it will be much better than we are able to accept!

B. How to test the truth

These lessons must be tested against scripture, of course. But many will try to test these views on unbalanced scales. It is not enough to find some supposed flaw in these views. Whatever test is applied to these matters must also be applied to any alternative view. Any contrary belief must measure up better than these under the same test, whatever it might be.

Suppose someone were persuaded that the Parable of the Prodigal Son contradicts these views. He would be taking an ambiguous passage, interpreting it to his convenience, and then finding a contradiction. But does his alternative view explain Hebrews 6:4-6? Does it explain Hebrews 9-10? Does it explain 2 Peter 3:21? Does it explain Romans 8 and Hebrews 8?

The question is not whether a passage can be interpreted to contradict the interpretations in this book. Doubtlessly, there are many passages that can be so interpreted. The true question is whether there is a passage that cannot be reconciled with these views under any reasonable interpretation—and whether those who disagree can come up with an interpretation that does a better job of explaining grace and the Holy Spirit (and all the verses) than the interpretation described in this book.

Moreover, I am sure that I have made mistakes. I have covered too much ground to have been completely error free. Finding one mistake (or more) does not disprove all that is taught. Please don't let anyone latch onto some convenient slip up of mine and persuade you that just because I have made some mistake, some other view of things is necessarily right. My being wrong does not automatically make anyone else right. Any other beliefs must withstand the same scrutiny that mine must.

D.C. Summary of the role of the Holy Spirit in grace

Following a Sunday night service, the wife of one of our preachers approached me. This woman is a graduate of a Church of Christ university and grew up in the Church. Her husband had been in the ministry for a number of years, and she is well regarded for her hard work in the church. She told me, "I want to speak to you about your lessons on Hebrews." I figured that I must have said something wrong. But she continued, "This morning was the first time that I ever felt saved." I was thunderstruck. This fine, well-educated, Christian woman had never had the blessing of feeling saved! And there were many others in the class who were in the same situation.

Her husband went forward that same day and made a tearful confession to the church. He said that he had been blessed to learn the wonders of God's grace, and yet hadn't shared the

Good News with his own wife. He urged all the members of the congregation to share the glories of God's goodness with their families and loved ones.

I thought of all the good men, preachers and others, whom I knew had a deep appreciation for God's grace but had not had the courage to share it with others. How many times have I taught a class on this subject, only to be congratulated afterwards by an older member who had reached the same conclusions years and years ago; but who had never told anyone else.

I began these lessons on grace with the claim that an understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit is essential to an understanding of grace. Let's summarize certain key operations of the Spirit in this context:

First, salvation itself is mediated by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's indwelling produces eternal life (John 4:14).

Second, you are only saved while you have the Spirit's indwelling. Lose the Spirit and lose your soul.

Third, and most important, the Spirit works within you as a Christian to change who you are. You become someone who wants to obey God and serve him. You are no longer motivated by fear but by love. But even more so, you are fundamentally changed—over time—to become more and more Christ-like.

Therefore, when Paul asks in Romans 6:1, "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" the ultimate answer is found in Romans 8:9—

You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you.

A person controlled by the Spirit does not need to know the answer to the question posed in Romans 6:1. Only someone who wants to sin asks such a question, and Christians have been made into new creations who do not want to disobey their Savior.

Romans 8:13-14 completes the answer:

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Rejecting the Spirit's promptings will cost you your soul. Moreover, you are no machine. You have free will and you must choose whether to do what you are motivated to do. The Spirit does not put to death your sinfulness. You do, but with the Spirit's help.

Therefore, God's grace is not just a system of gaining forgiveness or obeying laws. It is truly an intimate relationship with the Godhead. God himself is in you working in you especially

so that your salvation will not be lost. When Paul then says in Romans 8:31, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Paul is not talking about an impersonal God working at a distance through the millennia. He is talking about a God who has built a temple for himself in your heart so that he can personally see that his work to save you is not in vain.

Indeed, grace can only be well understood with an understanding of the Spirit’s workings. Not only that, the New Testament can only make sense if you read it with Spiritual eyes.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does a Christian obey God? How might your answer differ depending on the maturity of the Christian? Why does a fully matured Christian obey God?
2. Explain your answer to the preceding question in terms of the workings of the Holy Spirit.
3. If the Spirit were to operate only through the Word, how would our understanding of grace change?
4. What are some passages that we tend to skip over in our studies because they make us uncomfortable? What are some passages that we explain away rather than explain? How would the truths contained in these passages change our religion if we studied these passages with open minds?
5. Are we ever guilty of judging new ideas on unbalanced scales, denying the truth of the new ideas while ignoring greater problems with our comfortable, familiar old ideas? If so, give some examples. Why do we sometimes prefer to reject new truths and retain old falsehoods?

Chapter 9 Christian Fellowship

After graduating from college, my wife and I moved to our present church home. We found this congregation to be remarkably open and accepting. This acceptance was soon tested by a new couple who moved to town from Oregon. They were recent converts from a mission congregation in a state with few Christians of any stripe. They were thrilled at the prospect of joining a large church of more mature, experienced Christians.

Over the following weeks we learned about their Oregon congregation. It seems that while our new members were not Pentecostals, their former church had accepted into full fellowship a group of Pentecostal believers. We were astounded at the thought. We were more astounded when one member of this couple said, “Isn’t it great that the church has room for people who disagree on the workings of the Holy Spirit and that we still can all come together and pray and worship as one each Sunday!” We did not know how to respond.

My own reaction was to rebuke them for fellowshiping with people who believed and practiced a false doctrine, especially a doctrine as peculiar as speaking in tongues. But they firmly but gently disagreed. They explained how the church was so weak where they had come from that it could not afford to divide over incidental issues. In Oregon, they said, they were concerned with saving souls, and doctrine took a back seat to an urgent sense of mission, to seek and save the lost. They were amazed that there were so many Christians in Alabama, so many that the Church could divide itself many times and still have viable congregations.

Moreover, they insisted that they had learned much from the Pentecostal members. While they rejected Pentecostalism themselves, they had learned a much greater appreciation for the Spirit’s power and the work of God in their lives from their dealings with the Pentecostals. They told us that they thought it was important to hear other peoples’ differing views because we can often learn from them even if we disagree with them on some points. More importantly, they wanted to remain in fellowship with the Pentecostals so that eventually they might be persuaded to our friends’ point of view. And how, they asked, could we learn from or teach people that we have cast out of our congregation?

I couldn’t think of an appropriate response, and so said nothing. But I thought to myself, “How can we let people in the church that believe things we know are wrong?” As soon as I had expressed the question, I realized the problem: Everybody already in the church was surely wrong about some doctrinal point. Which are the points that matter? And I realized that I had no idea.

Too often the Bible’s powerful, broad lessons on grace are misinterpreted and used as a license for ignoring the will of God as revealed in his Word. God may accept you or me despite our sins, but sins are still sins and God’s grace does not make committing the sin okay. Just so, if I hold to a false doctrine, God may forgive me, but the doctrine is still false. Moreover, my false beliefs and false teaching are painful to God and injurious to his kingdom. After all, God set out his will for his people for good reasons.

The reason God's word teaches us about divorce, sexuality; church organization, the role of women, and such is that God's true teachings are best for us and best for his mission for us. False teaching may be forgiven, but it gets in the way of righteous living; the false doctrines will ultimately hurt God and his people. No Spirit-filled Christian should consider lies about God and his Word as acceptable just because God will forgive the lies.

There is a very real tension between desiring to know and teach the truth and accepting our brothers and sisters who understand the Bible differently than we do. We cannot insist on perfect agreement on every point, but neither can we pretend that false teaching does not matter. If I believe I am right about something, and if you disagree with me, then I must believe that you are wrong (and you must believe that I am wrong). To believe otherwise is to incorporate worldly philosophies into Christianity. It is atheistic philosophers who believe that truth is subjective and that truth cannot be known. Christians are taught by God that truth is objective. It is as real as the nails in Jesus' hands. We must not try to get along by pretending that there is nothing to disagree over or that our opinions about God's will do not matter.

Fortunately, the Bible deals very explicitly with these concerns. We will look first to the Bible's teachings on fellowship and then to its teachings on discipline. There are very real limits on the breadth of fellowship plainly taught in the scriptures.

A. Examples of fellowship—what disagreements are we to tolerate?

Several key New Testament passages teach how the apostles viewed the scope of acceptance into fellowship in application.

1. The Corinthian congregation

1 Corinthians is a letter from Paul to a deeply troubled church. Notice all that was wrong in Corinth:

- They were divided over personalities.
- They tolerated and even celebrated incest committed by one of their members.
- They abused the Lord's Supper.
- They violated the teachings of Jesus on divorce and remarriage.
- They violated the rules governing the role of women in the church.
- They abused the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
- They divided over the eating of meats sacrificed to idols.
- Some even denied the resurrection of the dead.

Nonetheless, while warning them sternly, Paul never questioned their salvation, and repeatedly indicated that they were saved:

(1 Cor. 1:2) To the church of God in Corinth, **to those sanctified in Christ Jesus** and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours:

(1 Cor. 1:4-8) I always thank God for you because of his **grace given you** in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way in all your speaking and in all your knowledge—because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. **He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

(1 Cor. 3:23) **[Y]ou are of Christ**, and Christ is of God.

(1 Cor. 4:6a) Now, **brothers**, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.”

(1 Cor. 6:6) But instead, one **brother** goes to law against another and this in front of unbelievers!

(1 Cor. 7:24) **Brothers**, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.

(1 Cor. 7:29) What I mean, **brothers**, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none;

(1 Cor. 11:33) So then, my **brothers**, when you come together to eat, wait for each other.

(1 Cor. 12:1) Now about spiritual gifts, **brothers**, I do not want you to be ignorant.

(1 Cor. 14:6) Now, **brothers**, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?

(1 Cor. 14:20) **Brothers**, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.

(1 Cor. 14:26a) What then shall we say, **brothers**? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.

(1 Cor. 14:39) Therefore, **my brothers**, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.

(1 Cor. 15:1) Now, **brothers**, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and **on which you have taken your stand**.

(1 Cor. 15:58) Therefore, **my dear brothers**, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor **in the Lord** is not in vain.

How could Paul have more plainly said that the Corinthians, although in jeopardy, were presently saved and that he expected them to stay saved? He called on them to repent, but not to be saved a second time.

Imagine how we would react if a congregation among the Churches of Christ taught that there is no resurrection of the dead! Would we call them brothers?

2. The Jerusalem congregation

Recall Paul's final trip to Jerusalem recorded in Acts 21. Although Paul arrived in Jerusalem very late in his career, many in the Jerusalem congregation were still insisting on adherence to Jewish rituals. Feelings were so strong that Paul was advised to voluntarily participate in a temple purification rite to show the church that he had not forsaken his Jewishness.

Imagine our reaction if a neighboring congregation began imposing Jewish rites on its members. Would we consider them "faithful"? Would they be in "full fellowship"? Would we support their Gospel meetings? Although Paul was an apostle and knew to an absolute certainty that the Jerusalem church was wrong and had no right to dictate their false opinions to him (an apostle!), nonetheless Paul accepted them as brothers—so much so that he went along with their peculiarities, presumably to avoid worsening the division between the Jewish and Gentile churches. Did Paul compromise the truth by yielding to these pressures? Did he "condone" their false teaching by yielding to their demands?

Clearly, Paul was a practical man. The time was not right to teach the Jerusalem church their errors. Paul had more important concerns, including building unity between the Jewish and Gentile churches. He accepted their demands and made no issue of their false beliefs not because he had to, but because it was the best thing for the Lord's church at that time. The Jerusalem church had no right to demand Paul's submission, but Paul had a right to accept the congregation as it was and to enjoy its fellowship despite its false beliefs—without being guilty of participating in or condoning its sin.

3. Romans and unity

The preceding examples could be multiplied many times. After all, most of the New Testament Epistles were written to churches in response to one or more errors. However, of all the epistles, Romans certainly provides the clearest teaching on tolerance of those we disagree with:

(Rom. 14:1-4) Accept him whose faith is weak, **without passing judgment on disputable matters**. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. **Who are you to judge someone else's servant?** To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Notice that Paul clearly states who is right and who is wrong on the issue of eating meat. However, despite having perfect, inspired knowledge on this matter, Paul does not condemn those who are in error. In fact, he plainly states that those who are right as to this issue "must not condemn" those who are wrong—even though they now know to an absolute certainty who is wrong.

How can we condemn those whom God does not condemn? Paul states absolutely that those who are wrong on this issue will "stand" (be saved)—not because of their merits, but because God can and will make them stand through his grace despite their false teachings and practices.

(Rom. 14:5-6) One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Pointedly, Paul never tells his readers whether one day is more sacred than another. The answer to the question does not affect whether God accepts that person or whether those who disagree are to accept that person. Notice that this issue has not been agreed upon even today. Some Christians consider Sunday as more sacred than other days. Others consider all days equally sacred. We must not condemn those we disagree with. Christian acceptance and fellowship should depend on the Christian's relationship with God, not on the Christian's view on issues. Because these Christians do what they think is right "to the Lord," that is, desiring to thereby serve their Lord, or in other words, with a penitent heart, they are assured of their salvation and their right to be accepted by their brothers and sisters.

(Rom. 14:10,13a) You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? ... Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.

The language could not be clearer. It is a sin to judge, look down on, or condemn your brother if he believes what he believes or does what he does "to the Lord." Once someone is under grace (by being saved through faith, repentance, and baptism), whether God accepts his actions depends on the state of his heart, not on the ultimate correctness of his actions. And only God truly knows the state of his heart.

I continue to be amazed by the number of my students who understand these rules but who cannot find it in themselves to believe that anyone could disagree with them and do so

honestly. What could be more arrogant than to suppose that God should condemn all those who are under grace but who disagree with you?

Consider the case of a new convert to Christ, freshly baptized. Does he immediately lose his salvation if it happens that he was baptized in a congregation with an “unscriptural” name? What if he later reads a tract from a Church of Christ friend that explains our historical opposition to such names, but is not convinced? What if his friend studies with him long and hard and he is still not convinced? Many of my brothers contend that there will always come a point when God will cease to tolerate this man’s error, because no one could in all good conscience fail to see the error of a church’s use of an unscriptural name.

Certainly there may be Christians who willfully and rebelliously fail to obey what they know to be true, and such people are in danger of irretrievably losing their souls. But we would be arrogant indeed to believe that all who disagree with us do so out of a rebellious spirit. After all, God did not reserve heaven only for scholars and logicians. Christians with limited intellectual gifts, poor study habits, or lack of understanding will also be welcomed. Even those who are so tradition-bound or emotionally tied to a false belief that they cannot see plain truth will be welcomed.

Our attitude is often Pharisaic—we try to earn our way into heaven by our scholarship, and we condemn those who are less knowledgeable than we are. Gnosticism was a heresy in the early Church that included many serious errors. The foremost peculiarity of the sect was that its members held that diligent study of its secrets was required for salvation. And we have become modern-day Gnostics, believing we can study our way into heaven, earning our salvation. Those less educated Christians who cannot attain to our high level of Bible scholarship but who are willing to take our word for what to believe will be saved; but those who have the misfortune to follow an unsound scholar will be damned—baptism, faith, a pure heart, grace, and the blood of Jesus notwithstanding.

Sound doctrine is important, but Paul tells us by inspiration that Christians who honestly reach false doctrinal conclusions “do so to the Lord,” and it is those of us who judge harshly who are in jeopardy. Arrogance is the first step toward losing your soul forever.

To many the next question is: Which issues can we disagree on and which can we not? Many of us would draw the line between matters dearly answered in the scriptures and those that are fairly debatable. But this test is not found in the Bible and cannot be made to work. First, if this really is the rule, it would be in the Bible. We are not free to legislate in such matters.

Second, what is plain to you is debatable to me. Which of us did God appoint to decide what is debatable? In fact, nearly every issue that divides us involves exactly this question. One says that the Bible plainly and obviously prohibits eating in the building. He refuses to associate with the “liberals” he disagrees with. Another says that the Bible plainly does not condemn eating in the building—and yet he accepts those who refuse. These two may never agree on this issue, but they are united because Jesus united them. The one who refuses fellowship sins—even though he is fully justified in his own conscience—not for what he believes regarding eating, but for his divisive attitude.

Others draw the line at “important” issues. But who decides what is important? The answer is clear in practice—the editors of church magazines and those who set the agendas of preacher seminars. My own observation is that many people will divide over an issue if the editors are selling articles proclaiming the issue to be important, while they readily tolerate one another if the editors are harping on something else.

There have been times when divorce and remarriage could be discussed without fear of being excommunicated by all who disagree with you. Now there are those who would “mark” and disfellowship anyone who happens to disagree with their interpretation of the scriptures. These issues are important, but we must learn how to disagree without dividing. God commands it. We will never agree on everything, and so we must find another way to stick together in an increasingly hostile world. This is not to suppose that truth is unknowable or completely subjective, as some worldly philosophies suggest. Rather, this is the necessary result of man’s fall from Eden and our inherent imperfection. We humans cannot be perfect, and therefore we will be unable to come to complete agreement on all matters of Christianity.

In Romans 14 Paul does not give a rule for what errors to tolerate and what not to tolerate—there is none. If a man or woman is a Christian, he or she must be accepted as a brother or sister. Period. God accepted him or her, so we must. Thus, the standard is the same as the standard for who is a Christian continued faith and repentance (and having been baptized). These are matters of the heart, and honest disagreements about other matters will not condemn a child of God—God will make him stand! “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1).

Paul next discusses a limitation, not on who is saved, but on how we are to exercise our freedom in Christ.

(Rom. 14:13b-14) Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.

This lesson must be heeded, but it should not be exaggerated. As we will see, a “stumbling block” or “obstacle” is not something that your brother feels strongly about; it is something that tempts him into acting against his conscience.

(Rom. 14:15,20-21,23) If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.... [I]t is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall. ... But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Paul’s concern is plain—do not exercise your freedom if in so doing you cause one of your brothers to sin by violating his conscience. Of course, if you persuade him that what you do is righteous, then he would no longer sin if he participates. Nothing prohibits teaching the truth.

Moreover, this verse does not excuse doctrinal cowardice. It does not justify preaching an abridged gospel under the guise that the “congregation isn’t ready for it” or because the church down the road might “write you up” in their bulletin. How will those who believe falsely (in your opinion) ever learn the truth (as you see it) if you keep silent? How can we let the Pharisees who teach unscriptural division and intolerance set the agenda for everyone else?

4. Limitations on fellowship

Paul then summarizes his conclusions in Romans 15:7: “Accept one another, then just as Christ accepted you” The standard we apply to determine who to accept (present tense, continuous action) is the identical standard that Christ applied when he accepted you (past tense, point-in-time action). Christ accepted you when you heard, believed, repented, confessed, and were baptized. You must accept all others under the same standard. More precisely, Christ accepted you based on your faith and repentance. You must accept others based on their faith and repentance. Nobody said that Christianity was supposed to be complicated, and it’s not.

I understand that the foregoing lesson is hard to apply in practice. There are some very real limitations on our ability to freely fellowship with some of our fellow Christians. We can’t fully fellowship those who will not fellowship us. If those who are saved but who disagree with us will not admit that we are their brothers, we can’t make them change. We can, however, make it clear that we are ready and willing to accept them as soon as they will let us.

We can accept as brothers those who worship or otherwise practice contrary to our own beliefs, but we cannot participate in their practices against our consciences. Therefore, worship becomes an especially sensitive issue. If half of a congregation thinks a multiple-cup communion is a sin, it would be hard to hold a common communion. But that is no excuse for condemning your brother.

It doesn’t take a lot of creativity or flexibility to make arrangements suitable to both sides of a disagreement, so long as they wish to stay together. And I think that in most cases Christians who disagree would want to stay together if they could stay and not be forced into practices that violate their consciences. Unfortunately, too often we have been falsely taught that staying together “condones” the sins of the others or “fellowships sin.” We all sin and do so frequently. We come to church *because* we are sinners. Your sitting on a pew next to me does not approve of my sin, any more than Jesus’ dying on the cross for me approved of my sin. He knew I was a sinner when he did it, and he accepted me anyway. You must do the same.

B. Discipline and *anathema*

Before going any further, we need to consider what the Bible teaches about discipline and excommunication. We often forget that, as very broad as grace is, there is a need and place for disfellowship. Moreover, many of the verses dealing with this important topic are used to support various narrow views of the scope of Christian fellowship and “non-denominational” Christianity. You must well understand church discipline before you can fully understand the doctrines involved in non-denominational Christianity.

Many passages deal with this subject. I believe they are best understood as falling into two classes—disfellowship, intended to be temporary, and *anathema*, which is much more severe.

1. Disfellowshipping

My wife and I moved to a new church, and I soon began teaching a Bible class for young singles and couples. After the first class we invited everyone to join us after church for pizza at a restaurant. Everyone was astounded. They had never gone out to eat together after church before. It had never occurred to them!

A few weeks later, we invited everyone to our home for a Friday night fellowship. And once again, there was utter astonishment! You mean the whole class? Not just your close friends? You actually expect us all to be there?

Somehow these very fine Christians had never been told that “love one another” includes eating together, visiting in one another’s homes, sharing in each other’s lives. They had no idea what fellowship is all about.

a. 2 Thessalonians 3

The principles dealing with disfellowshipping are illustrated by 2 Thessalonians 3:

(2 Thes. 3:6-15) In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. ... For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.”

We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.

If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

In no uncertain terms, Paul commands the Thessalonians “to keep away from” and to “not associate with” a brother who is idle. However, such a man is still a brother and not an enemy, and the motivation of this disfellowshipping is to shame the brother into repentance. These conclusions are clear:

- Disfellowshipping is primarily to cause the sinner to repent. It is not a means of culling the lost from the saved. That is God’s job. Remember the Parable of the Tares (or Weeds).

- Those who are disfellowshipped are to be disfellowshipped out of love—not condescension or arrogance.

Disfellowshipping, therefore, only works (and only should be done) if the brother will likely be shamed into repentance by the church’s actions. If the brother has already left the fellowship of the church, the church cannot disfellowship him. It is plainly impossible. (Attempting to disfellowship someone who has withdrawn from a church can also result in severe legal liability for the church.)

Disfellowshipping can’t work unless the brother has close friends within the church. Such relations among Christians within their congregations should be typical, but they sadly often are not. The church must be an important part of his social life. In fact, the brother must be so bound to the congregation that he can’t simply go down the road to another church. A dead, unloving congregation cannot disfellowship—it has no fellowship to remove a brother from.

The command to disfellowship was directed to the church as a whole: “brothers.” I would not deny the importance of the elders in this process, but the whole church must join in this action—or no disfellowshipping will have occurred.

Amazingly, this passage has been frequently misinterpreted as justifying a “loving” disfellowship of anyone we disagree with. Verse 6 is ripped out of context and understood to say that anyone who does not live according to any teaching of the Bible can and should be disfellowshipped! After all, it is argued, any mistake in any doctrine can fit within the phrase “the teaching you received from us.”

This interpretation is flagrantly wrong. The “teaching” Paul is discussing is not everything ever taught by Paul; it is: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” Verse 10 clearly says so.

Moreover, if all mistakes of doctrine justify disfellowshipping, then every member of every congregation would be disfellowshipped unless he agreed with the elders on every single point—*every point*! I doubt seriously that there is an eldership in the brotherhood that would agree on every point, much less a whole congregation!

Those who make this argument frequently see this weakness in their logic, and they seek to find some Biblical basis to disfellowshipping on the issues they feel strongly about and to avoid having to disfellowship on the points that they have no emotional attachment to. But the Bible nowhere provides any distinction other than simple faith and repentance.

Thus, I would contend that the reason idleness justifies disfellowshipping is because these people had been squarely warned by an apostle of God to work. They refused to do so, not based on an honest disagreement, but full well knowing they were sinning. This is just the sort of sin that could cost these brothers their souls (Heb. 10:26) or that might “lead to death” (1 John 5:16). Where a brother’s soul is in jeopardy, extraordinary measures are justified. But Romans 14, among other passages, as previously shown, makes it clear that, absent a willful continuing to sin, disfellowshipping is not only not required, it is a divisive sin.

Note more especially that this disfellowshipping is done by the local congregation, not self-appointed gospel police from other congregations. We say that we believe in church autonomy, but too many violate the principles of church autonomy and try to “disfellowship” those in other churches. This is not a Biblical practice and should not be tolerated.

b. 1 Corinthians 5

The other key passage for this type of discipline is 1 Corinthians 5:

(1 Cor. 5:1-13) It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father’s wife. And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?

Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, **hand this man over to Satan**, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and **his spirit saved** on the day of the Lord.

Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you maybe a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ...

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. **With such a man do not even eat.** What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? **Are you not to judge those inside?** God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked man from among you.”

Although this passage is not without difficulties, certain points are evident.

The goal of disfellowshipping is primarily that the brother’s “spirit [be] saved on the day of the Lord.” Once again, no arrogance or condescension is permitted.

This brother knew he was sinning. The whole church knew and was proud! Once again, there was no doctrinal dispute. Rather, the brother arrogantly, willfully continued to sin, evidently misunderstanding God’s grace in the worst way.

The congregation was commanded to disfellowship the brother—“when you are assembled.” Once again, while the elders must shepherd the church, disfellowshipping is simply ineffective (and unscriptural) if the church itself does not participate in the decision.

Purging a bad influence from the church is an element, but not the driving force, of the action. Scriptural disfellowshipping always has two advantages. First, the brother is expected to be shamed into repentance. The sin that justifies disfellowshipping is the sin of failing to repent of what you know is wrong. Second, the congregation is warned away from following this man's dangerous example.

On the other hand, we do not disfellowship to rid our churches of all sinners—there would be no one left to turn out the lights! The sins Paul warns the Corinthians about in are sins that all recognize as such. No one swindles another and honestly claims that he thought he was doing God's will.

Honest disagreements about what the Bible means or how to apply it (other than faith and penitence) are not in Paul's list. He deals with this question in 1 Corinthians 8 where he discusses meat sacrificed to idols in the same terms as in Romans 14. He then teaches humility for those of us who look down on our weaker brothers due to their doctrinal failings:

(1 Cor. 8: 1b-3) We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God.

Is knowledge important? Certainly. But will God save the humble sinner whose heart is filled with love in preference to the condemning scholar? You know the answer.

2. *Anathema*

My church was organizing a youth rally not too long ago. A youth leader from another congregation called up our youth minister to advise him that he would not be bringing his teens. It seems that the fact that Preacher X would speak at the rally caused his elders a problem. Their young people could not be permitted to associate with this well-known and highly effective preacher.

Our minister asked why, since he knew of no accusation against the speaker. The other youth minister replied that Preacher X sat on an editorial board of a church publication with Preacher Y, and Preacher Y had written a paper while in college questioning our opposition to instrumental music. Preacher Y had been "marked" by someone and therefore Preacher X could not be fellowshipped. As a result, the young people of that church were to be denied the fellowship of other Christian teens and the sound lessons that Preacher X would powerfully present.

We held the rally, Preacher X spoke, the Lord blessed his speaking, and many teens committed their lives to the Lord. The teenagers at the other congregation stayed home.

a. *1 Corinthians*

While disfellowshipping is commanded in certain situations, there is a much more severe form of excommunication, *anathema*.

(1 Cor. 16:22 KJV) If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be *Anathema. Maranatha.*¹

(1 Cor. 16:22 KJV) If anyone does not love the Lord—a curse be on him. Come, O Lord!

Anathema is the Greek word for “accursed.” In the Jewish synagogues of the time, the term was used to mean an excommunication of the severest sort. As was true among the Christian churches, the Jews also recognized a less severe form of disfellowship, being similar to the type of disfellowship described in the preceding section.²

Similar language is found in 1 Corinthians 3:

(1 Cor. 3:16-17) Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

While “*anathema*” is not used in this verse, clearly Paul is pronouncing an eternal curse on those who would destroy God's temple. This verse has frequently been misunderstood by confusing it with 1 Corinthians 6:

(1 Cor. 6:19) Do you not know that **your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit**, who is in you, whom you have received from God?

This passage clearly teaches the sanctity of the body and can rightly be argued to apply to fornication. However, 1 Corinthians 3 is a very different passage. In it, the temple is “you yourselves,” or in the King James, “ye.” “Ye” is the 17th Century word for “you” in the plural. The New International Version translators add “yourselves” to make plain that Paul is addressing, not a Christian's body, but the local congregation as a whole.

Remember that this passage was written in response to the problem described in 1 Corinthians 1:

(1 Cor. 1:10-12) I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.”

Paul pronounced his curse in chapter 3 on those who would divide a congregation as described in chapter 1. Moreover, he did not spare those who claimed to follow Christ. All those

¹ Aramaic for “Come, O Lord!”

² David C. Gross, *1,001 Questions and Answers About Judaism* (Doubleday and Co., Inc. 1978).

who divide Christians from Christians are condemned by Paul, and nowhere does he distinguish those who are doctrinally sound from those in error—he only distinguishes dividers from uniters.

If you destroy one of Christ's churches by dividing brother from brother, God will destroy you. The Bible is plain, and only a fool would dare rationalize his way around this curse.

The seriousness of this matter can further be seen from the entire book of 1 Corinthians. Paul deals with issue after issue, divorce, long hair, abuse of gifts of the Spirit, even denial of the resurrection of the dead, and he only pronounces a curse twice—once on those who would split a church and once on those who do not love God. And how can you truly love God and endeavor to tear Christ's body on earth into pieces?

Paul re-emphasizes the importance of united churches in 1 Corinthians 12:

(1 Cor. 12:12-27) The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ...

As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" and the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, **those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.** And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, **so that there should be no division in the body**, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

These familiar verses contain an unfamiliar thought. Those who are weaker, less honorable, or unpresentable are entitled to special concern by the rest—"so that there should be no division." God cures their failings by giving them "greater honor," to put them on an equal footing with the strong, the honored, and the presentable. In chapter 8, Paul describes as "weaker" the brothers who were in doctrinal error. There is no reason to suppose that he has now changed definitions.

Remember that Paul teaches this heart-felt lesson in the midst of a book that teaches a series of lessons on doctrinal error. Paul is not saying that false doctrine is okay. He vigorously but lovingly teaches the truth to those who are in error—but he only condemns those who are divisive, even when they are guilty of no other error.

b. Romans 16

Numerous other passages are to the same effect. Amazingly, however, many have been used by some to argue in favor of division.

(Rom. 16:17-18) I urge you, brothers, to **watch out for [KJV: mark] those who cause divisions** and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. **Keep away from them.** For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.

No book teaches grace more powerfully than Romans. And yet verse 17 has been used by some to justify “marking” anyone they have a doctrinal dispute with and urging the churches to refuse to associate with the marked man.

“Mark” is 17th Century English for “watch out.” Who should we watch out for? Clearly it is those who cause divisions and create obstacles in the church’s way. Who is divisive? Is it the man who has the courage to express his beliefs about the Bible, even though his beliefs are not popular or in fashion? Or is it the man who “marks” all who dissent from his views and then marks those who won’t go along with his marking? Paul’s point is not that we should mark all who misunderstand Romans, but that we should mark those who divide contrary to the lessons of Romans—Romans 14 and 15 especially! Obviously enough, “the teaching you have learned” is the teaching Paul had just taught! Grace, the Holy Spirit, love, do not judge, accept one another.

Do I become divisive every time I disagree with you? Certainly not. Do I become divisive only if I disagree with you on any doctrine that you feel strongly about? The Bible did not make your feelings the standard by which I am judged, did it? What if I disagree on a matter that you think the Bible teaches plainly? Is your sense of logic the standard for whether I’m to be accursed?

Please understand this: there is no objective way to distinguish “plain” verses from debatable verses. Conclusions that are extremely obvious to you may not be obvious to me. Maybe you’re smarter than I. Maybe you understand written English better than I. Maybe you’ve studied the issue longer than I. Maybe my perception is clouded by deeply felt emotions. Maybe you’re wrong. Am I to be marked and expelled from the fellowship of the church because I just plain, honestly disagree?

Almost every issue that we might disagree about involves two varying interpretations. The advocates for each think that their interpretation is plain on the face of the Bible. I think the literal indwelling is obvious in the scriptures. I think that it is really important, more important than nearly everything else we might disagree over. If you take the “Word only” view, should I mark you and write letters to sympathetic churches, urging them not to let you in the door?

If we aren’t to divide over an issue as central as the Holy Spirit, who is referred to on nearly every opening of the epistles, why should we divide over divorce and remarriage, instrumental music, choirs, the role of women, church organization, the use of church moneys, and the like. The Bible deals with the Spirit 10 or 20 times more often (at least!) than it deals with any one of these topics. Where does it say that it’s okay to divide over these matters but not the role of God’s Spirit?

c. 2 John

2 John expands on the basis for *anathema*.

(2 John 7-11) Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. **Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God;** whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. **If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him.** Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.

We are to expel anyone who does not “continue in the teaching of Christ.” Some have argued that this means that we expel all who teach falsely on a subject taught by Jesus. Thus, anyone we disagree with regarding, say, divorce and remarriage must be expelled.

As pointed out above, there are serious difficulties in arguing that we expel everyone who makes a mistake regarding any teaching. And there are serious difficulties in drawing lines among Christians—the Bible just doesn’t do it. Clearly, the verse is being taken out of context.

Verse 7 warns us against those who deny that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. This false doctrine strikes at the very heart of our faith and will cost those who are deceived their souls. This is the “teaching of Christ” and this is the lie that justifies expulsion. Note that Strong’s Concordance defines the Greek word translated “teaching” as “doctrine” or “instruction.”

The Greek word is *didache*. *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* defines it as “that which is taught.” Hence, “that which is taught of Christ.” It is irrelevant whether the phrasing is taken as genitive (the teaching about Christ) or subjective (Christ’s teachings), because the particular teaching in mind is clearly both taught by Christ and about Christ, the teaching that Jesus is the Christ. The context permits no other interpretation. A broader interpretation would condemn all who are guilty of any doctrinal error at all. Who could make it to heaven under such a standard?

The reason for the expulsion is to protect the church from those who teach a doctrine that endangers the souls of Christians. It is not primarily to encourage the deceivers to repent; rather it is an extreme measure to save souls—not just from error, but from damnation.

d. Titus

Titus is another misused book.

(Titus 3:9-11) But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. **Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.** You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

There are many of us who engage in foolish controversies and arguments. If we expelled them all, many of our classes would be nearly empty (but much more pleasant places!) But it is not everyone given to argument who is to be expelled. It is only those who are “divisive.” Who is

divisive? Not those who say things we disagree with—only those who refuse to accept the brotherhood of those penitent believers with whom they disagree.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does God tolerate and save members of congregations that practice contrary to his Word?
2. How should the Churches of Christ deal with those who act divisively?
3. How should we deal with editors of Church periodicals who act divisively? Give some examples of divisive conduct of an editor.
4. Give some examples of members of a congregation that ought to be disfellowshipped. Which sinful members should not be disfellowshipped?

Chapter 10

Non-denominational Christianity

Some years ago, our church office received a phone call from a concerned preacher at a nearby congregation. He was soon directed to our pulpit minister. The preacher began, "I understand that your teenagers are going to hear Rubel Shelly."

"Yes," our minister replied. "Is there a problem?"

"Is there a problem? Haven't you heard about Rubel?"

"Heard what?"

"Why, he believes in non-denominational Christianity! He's even written a book!"

Our preacher was largely unaware of any controversy surrounding Rubel, and honestly replied, "I thought that was what we've always believed in. Don't you teach non-denominational Christianity?"

A. The only Christians?

While still in junior high, I had been pondering the question of evolution and the age of the earth. All the science books I read taught that the universe is very old. My Sunday School teachers taught that the earth was created about 6,000 years ago. It eventually occurred to me that there might be a problem here.

I asked my father about this. At first he suggested that the earth is indeed quite old. We discussed various theories, such as the "gap" theory, seeking to reconcile science and the Bible. This had a great deal of appeal to me. Scientists were highly revered by me in those days of Mercury and Gemini space launches, and it felt good not having to disagree with such capable people.

By the time I was a teenager, my father had begun studying the materials of the Creation Research Society and like organizations. He soon became convinced that the earth is indeed only a few thousand years old. I was much perplexed by this turn of events, and so he suggested that I study the same materials.

While I was trying to form my own opinion, I was visited by my precocious younger cousin, who idolized me. His father is a doctor. I explained to my cousin the materials I was studying. I pointed out that if the creationist materials were right, then the earth really was formed in six days not very long ago.

He had been taught that the earth is old. As we got well into our studies, my mother called us for supper. Being of junior high age, we ignored her. Soon my uncle came in and loudly insisted that we go to supper immediately. My cousin then exclaimed, "But Dad, what we are studying may determine my eternal salvation!"

I was shocked. I thought that these were really interesting and important questions. I loved reading the science articles on both sides. I really wanted to get to the truth of the matter. But I knew that as a junior high student I could not reach a final decision on the Second Law of Thermodynamics, neutrino capture, or any of the other exotic issues being discussed in all these materials. Could the fate of my very soul depend on the conclusion I reached?

I knew that no one else in my congregation had access to these materials. Few would spend the money that my father had spent to have all the resources I had. But neither he nor I felt fully competent to evaluate much of what was written. And here my cousin is telling me that he thinks that he will go to hell if he guesses wrong and takes the wrong position on this issue!

I thought about this, and am still thinking about it. Will God give all Christians the Great True-False Test in the Sky before letting them into heaven? What will the questions be? What score will I need? Will he grade on a curve?

After Rubel Shelly's publication of *I Just Want to be a Christian*, a number of authors wrote books and articles opposing the views that he had expressed. Since Shelly's positions are similar to those argued for in this book, it is important to consider the arguments of those disagreeing with him. What are their arguments?

I must first point out that there is a great deal of common ground and mutual respect between the two points of view being discussed. The books and articles written to dispute Shelly's non-denominational views often and very appropriately state in detail the very substantial agreement of the two sides.

The first point of departure, though, is the consequence of sin in the life of a saved person. Those opposing Shelly's views feel that there are certain sins that remove a Christian from grace. Certainly, this much is correct, but the disagreement relates to the point at which the Christian is no longer forgiven. Which sins are continuously forgiven and which require a change in behavior or doctrine to be forgiven?

Some argue that any action that is not authorized by the Word will cause a Christian to no longer be saved. While often unstated, it is clear that this argument is intended to be limited to those areas where the Churches of Christ have traditionally insisted on authority: primarily the conduct of the assembly, the organization of the church, and the name of the church.

Clearly, if one exceeds Biblical authority out of rebellion and a rejection of the Lordship of Jesus, he will jeopardize his soul. But what if he simply makes a mistake? What if God doesn't approve of clapping in the assembly and we clap "to the Lord"? Are we condemned for all eternity? Why does grace work to forgive murder and adultery but not well-intended worship of our Lord?

You see, the biggest problem with this type of reasoning is that the Bible nowhere makes a distinction between moral sins, doctrinal sins, church organization sins, etc. In other words, grace is just as broad for doctrinal sins, improper worship, improper church organization, and the wrong name as it is for all other sins. God has made no distinction. If God will forgive pride, Pharisaism, materialism, a lack of a servant attitude, bigotry, laziness, failure to evangelize, and

selfishness (even though we persist in these sins!), why won't he forgive the use of an unscriptural church name? God makes no distinction, and neither can we.

I am familiar with two formally argued efforts to make this distinction. One would only condemn those guilty of sins of "obligation." Another would only condemn false doctrine that results in wrongful conduct. Neither distinction is found in the Bible.

Certainly those who violate some obligation imposed by God have sinned. However, nowhere does the Bible say that those who commit such sins necessarily fall away. We must always remember that the essence of grace is that sins are normally forgiven and the sinner does not lose his salvation due to sin (otherwise, what good is grace?)

Drawing a distinction based on conduct basically means that grace covers only sins not yet committed. Once I commit an actual sin, I fall away! More fundamentally, this view takes a narrow view of sin. Why should the sin of gossip or selfishness be covered by the blood of Jesus but the sin of speaking in tongues be outside grace? Both are wrong, but which does more harm? I can speak in a tongue and believe that I am honoring God, but I cannot gossip about you "to the Lord." Our priorities are badly confused, aren't they?

Many writers have recognized this flaw in such arguments, and so they argue that those who practice differently from us must do so with a hard heart. Such writers recognize that to fall away the Christian must intentionally sin, as required by Hebrews 10:26. Thus, the writers assume that all who disagree with the writers as to how to conduct the Sunday assembly must do so intentionally!

Isn't it hard to imagine that the millions of believers who assemble to praise God every Sunday outside the Churches of Christ all know that they are doing it wrong but have willfully chosen to ignore God's will out of a hard heart? Do we really think that each of the one million members of the independent Christian Churches knows better than to use an instrument in the assembly but does so anyway out of a rebellious, hardhearted spirit? Do we really think that everyone who has heard our arguments on the instrument has been convinced of the truth of our position but has chosen to knowingly disregard God's will?

Some writers then argue that denominationalism is a particularly wicked sin, because it involves division. As we have seen, the Bible condemns division in no uncertain terms. However, we often fail to see that disagreeing is not the same as dividing. Obviously, if we disagree as to whether Jesus is the Son of God or whether to live a penitent life, much more than a division is the result. But disagreeing about instrumental music, church organization, or even Calvinism does not divide unless we make these issues "tests of fellowship." I have chosen my words carefully. *We* make such issues tests of fellowship, not God. When *we* define denominationalism as the sin of being wrong on any issue that we feel strongly about, *we* make our own traditions and subjective feelings the test of God's salvation.

Many argue that salvation depends on what church you are a member of. If the church you attend teaches or practices falsely, you are damned, goes the argument. But God saves and God condemns individuals, not what humans falsely call "churches." God's church is all whom he has saved, and its boundaries are defined by his grace and not by the names that we attach to

ourselves. There is only *one* church in the eyes of God, *his* church. Therefore, the question cannot be, what church are you a member of? It can only be, are you a member of the church? All Christians are members of God's church, because he added them (whether they know it or not). Thus, the same question is simply, are you saved?

Many writers place a remarkable emphasis on the congregation's name in determining whether its members are saved. Do I fall away if I attend an otherwise faithful church with any unscriptural name? Does "Church of Christ" with a capital C qualify as scriptural? Does the Bible ever use "church of Christ" or "Church of Christ" as a proper noun? What authorizes our so doing?

Our undue emphasis on the name of the church is demonstrated by the following analysis. Suppose that an otherwise sound Church of Christ chose to call itself the Nashville Baptist Church. Would we count them as part of the "brotherhood"? Would we list them as a Church of Christ? As a church of Christ? Doubtlessly, we would not.

Now suppose that a Church of Christ becomes a cult but that it continues to call itself a Church of Christ. Would we count them as a Church of Christ, although in error? Wouldn't we list it in our directories as one of "us," but perhaps with a footnote? Suppose a Church of Christ tolerates speaking in tongues? So long as they continue to use our preferred name, don't we count them as part of "the brotherhood," although in error?

I know the answers to these questions from personal experience, and the answers prove that we place much more emphasis on a church's name than on its beliefs and practices in defining the Church of Christ. We had better spell it with a capital C.

The problem Shelly's opponents must confront, as must we all, is drawing a line between the mistakes in doctrine covered by grace and those that are not. Lack of faith and lack of repentance are outside grace. Those who have never been saved are outside grace. But God through His grace saves forever and forgives, once for all, everything else. And as James and many other writers remind us, repentance will evidence itself by a sacrificial, spiritual life, and a penitent person will study his Bible to do God's will as well as he can understand it. Nonetheless, a penitent person may not have reached the level of Bible scholarship to have determined precisely God's will concerning the assembly or the organization of a congregation of believers. Nothing in the Bible states that such errors fall outside the power of God's grace.

Our struggle with issues such as these comes from one source—our tendency to believe that sins will not be forgiven until specifically repented of and forgiveness specifically requested. Thus, we would traditionally concede that a Christian who is guilty of false worship would be forgiven and restored to grace when he comes to a realization that his worship has been in error, repents, and prays for forgiveness. We would deny that he is saved while he is practicing his error, even though his error is completely innocent and well intended. How can he repent and still be practicing his error, we would argue.

However, we are quite happy to feel forgiven for our own failings with regard to giving, personal evangelism, wasting of our gifts, materialism, bigotry, being judgmental, and such, and we confidently assert based on 1 John 1:7 that our sins are even continuously forgiven. In short,

we apply the generous standard to sins *we* commit and the tough standard to sins *other people* commit.

I don't think that our judging in this sinful manner is intentional. It is a pattern of thinking that we have slipped into by accident. When we change our judgments, we don't realize that we have changed from one standard to another. But now it is time to change. Rethinking religion in the light of such a radical departure from our traditions is not easy, and it will take time. But we have to do it. God will help us, though, if we will only try.²³

B. The real sin of denominationalism

While I was in high school, my church planned a gospel meeting. We teenagers were charged with a door knocking campaign to get others to come. I was assigned to go door to door with a high school girl in my Sunday School class. She was about a year younger than I and had been a regular church-goer for as long as I had known her. We were two good Christians, doing what good Christians do. And I was still looking for gold stars.

After an hour or so of fruitless knocking, and countless conversations with people who did not appreciate what we were doing for them (and earning no gold stars), our tempers were on edge. We came across a woman who was a member of another Church of Christ in town. This church was anti-cooperative. They believed exactly as we did, except they weren't willing to use church treasury funds to support orphans homes or the works of other congregations. We called them "anti's."

This woman heard us out and then said that she went to church enough at her own congregation and saw no reason to spend any more time in church. After all, she said, why go to your church and mine too, when we are all going to the same place in the end?

We politely said we understood, and frustrated once again, we turned to leave. As we did, my fellow door knocker said under her breath, "That's what you think!" I was floored—not only by her conclusion, but by the sheer delight she took in condemning a fellow member of the Church of Christ to hell.

My best friend at the time was an anti. I was deeply enthralled by one particular anti girl and was planning on persuading her to date me, despite my being a "liberal." Anti's called us "liberals" because we used church funds for an orphan's home and to support the mission and other programs of other churches. Anti girls would rather date a Baptist than a "liberal."

It hadn't occurred to me that they might be lost for their peculiar views. We had lots of members with very peculiar views. There just weren't enough who could agree on any other peculiarity to split off and form their own sect. Why accept these strange people and reject the

²³ The most thorough books opposing the views of Rubel Shelly are Thomas B. Warren, *Christians Only—and the Only Christians* (National Christian Press, Inc. 1984), and Bert Thompson, *Non-Denominational Christianity: Is Unity Possible?* (Apologetics Press 1984).

anti's? Why reject their very attractive and eligible high school girls? There were some very practical implications here!

I thought about this for some time, and I soon realized that the key question was which issues could cost you your soul and which would God overlook. Do we just trust to God's mercy (and we know what that means!) or does the Bible give a rule?

The answer came soon. My father (who loves to buy religious books) bought me a translation of the New Testament by William Barclay, the author of the well-known non-denominational Daily Bible Study commentaries. (This was before such translations as the NIV and New American Standard Bible were published). I sat down to read a verse or two to see how I liked it. Three Bible books later I realized that I could now read a book of the Bible with this translation as easily as I could read many King James Version chapters. I was hooked! I read 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and then Romans. I read Romans 14. I read Romans 15. I read them again. And again. And I wondered: why haven't our preachers preached this? This tells us what to think of the anti's!

Coincidentally, it was soon to be High School Night at church. We teenage boys were to conduct the entire service—even the sermon. I was elected the preacher. Still excited by my new find, I preached from Romans 14 and 15. My dad had warned me that this was controversial, but I couldn't see why. The Bible was clear. And I didn't care what people thought. I wasn't any too pleased with having to preach, and if they didn't like my message, the worst they could do is not invite me to speak again!

I preached that the anti's may well be wrong on the use of church money, but that was no worse than being wrong on eating meat or celebrating certain days. I preached them into heaven. I returned to my seat I knew I would be in trouble now.

When the services ended, people lined up to speak to me. Many whispered to me their congratulations. They said I was right and that it was high time someone said what I did! But they said so so quietly that even I could barely hear them.

I was never asked to preach again.

The first time I taught a class on the history of the Restoration Movement, I passed around an advertisement for local churches published in our local paper, The newspaper sells spaces on a page to various congregations in town, and lumps the churches together under appropriate headings. For example, there was one heading for Baptists—Southern Baptist Convention, one for United Methodist Church, one for the Churches of Christ, and one for Non-Denominational.

I asked the class if the ad was scriptural or if they saw anything wrong with it. No one had the least concern. And then I asked why we weren't listed under Non-Denominational? No one had noticed the problem at first, but now it seemed plain. Then they realized another problem—the churches already listed under Non-Denominational included some rather odd groups that we would not care to be confused with. Moreover, the other Churches of Christ in town would be offended if we chose not to be listed with them. They doubted that we could all

agree to be lumped with the non-Church of Christ non-denominational churches. They rather uncomfortably concluded that we would have to advertise ourselves as a denomination.

Make no mistake: denominationalism is a sin. It is a type of division, and the Bible condemns division. But we are also a denomination—and sinners—if we are also guilty of the sin of denominationalism.

How many times have you read a tract or book captioned something like *Why I'm a Member of the Church of Christ?* (There have been many similarly titled books and tracts published. I do not have any one in particular in mind.) The only correct, non-denominational answer to the tract's question is: "Because God added me to his church when he saved me."

We all know that we don't join Christ's church—he adds you when he saves you, whether you intend to be a member of a church or not (Acts 2:47). The only Biblical use of "church" or "churches of Christ" is the body of all saved persons. Thus, the only permissible subject for such a tract or book is how to be saved.

A cappella music is not part of the plan of salvation. Neither is meeting in a building with a particular name attached. Regardless of how much these issues matter, they should not be mistaken for faith in Christ or accepting Jesus as Lord. Certainly one who has accepted Jesus as Lord will use or not use instruments of music in the assembly as he understands the scripture, but the baptism of a penitent believer who has never understood such matters is perfectly effective to save, and such a person is added to Christ's church (the church of Christ) by the will of God.

Thus, when we use "Church of Christ" or "church of Christ" in the sense used in the tract, that is, in the sense of "Which meeting place should I attend Sunday morning?" we use the term in a denominational sense. Use of the term this way is no more authorized by the Bible than "Baptist" or "Presbyterian." Very rarely in our sermons and conversations do we use "Church of Christ" or "church of Christ" to refer to all who are saved.

Would an otherwise sound congregation of baptized, penitent believers that out of ignorance called itself the "West Side Independent Church (*a cappella*)" be lost since "Independent Church" is not found in the scriptures? Would we call them a Church of Christ? Why not? If they are saved, they are all members of the church of Christ, and a congregation of such saved people is as much a church of Christ as any could be.

Notice that nowhere in scripture do Christians form congregations known as, say, the Ephesus Church of Christ or the North Rome Church of Christ. The term is never used in this sense in the Bible, and it is downright silly to argue that our use is somehow "scriptural" while most other names for churches are not. Each congregation in the New Testament is a church. All adjectives and adjective phrases describing the church are descriptive of "church" and not a part of the title. "Church of Christ" is not a title or proper noun in the Bible. The title is "church" and "church" only. If God wanted all of his followers to meet in assemblies known as Churches of Christ, the term would have been used in such a sense in the scriptures.

We have adopted this term because (1) it is found in the Bible (as a common noun) and, (2) by all churches in our tradition agreeing to use a common name, we can readily identify those

who are like minded. Therefore, “Church of Christ” identifies, not the saved, but those within the Church of Christ tradition. It indicates that we are among the saved, but it should not indicate that only those who meet in buildings with this name are saved.

Ultimately, the test of denominationalism is not the name selected but the attitude of those who wear the name. We who are identified with the “Churches of Christ” are not “Church of Christ-ers,” as we frequently say. We are Christians. And so are very many others. And they attend churches of Christ every Sunday just as we do. But their churches are differently named, reflecting differing interpretations of the scriptures and differing traditions. God forgives “them” just as he forgives “us.” All such churches are churches of Christ. If we deny it, we are much worse than a denomination. We become judgers and dividers, and the Bible speaks plainly to such persons.

C. Worship and organization

Shortly after I graduated from college, I studied the Bible with a good friend trying to come up with a coherent basis for making some Biblical rules binding and others optional. In particular, we wondered why some rules could only be violated on penalty of damnation and others were tolerated. We soon realized that the rules that were treated as necessary for salvation dealt largely with the pattern of congregational worship and organization. It later dawned on me that these were the rules that historically divided denominations. In fact, the basis for this thinking can be traced, I believe, to the line of reasoning that the Churches of Christ have often used to persuade individuals to “join” the Churches of Christ.

We have often argued that the test of the one true church is found in a number of “marks”: scriptural organization, worship, name, and founder. It is hard for many to deal with the more abstract concepts of predestination or apostolic succession, but everyone knows what their church believes regarding worship and organization.

We argue that, since our form of worship and our form of organization are the only Biblical forms, the “Church of Christ” is therefore the one true church. It is the only church bearing the “marks” of the true church. But as persuasive as this argument sounds, it is utterly false and anti-Biblical.

The mark and only mark of the church of Christ is God’s mark, his seal, the Holy Spirit—not its name, form of worship, form of organization, teachings on the Holy Spirit, or anything else. If the individual members of the church are saved, the church is a church of Christ. End of analysis.

Can you have an unscriptural form of worship or organization and still be saved? What does the Bible say? Can sinners go to heaven? Yes, if the sinners are baptized, believe in Jesus, and accept Jesus as their Lord. Do the same rules apply to sins of false worship or organization? Yes, the same rules apply to all sins other than the sin of irretrievably falling away as described in Hebrews 6 and 10.

But isn’t God displeased with false patterns of worship? Certainly, but not half as displeased as he is with failing to give as he commands, failing to care for the sick and poor as he

commands, failing to teach the gospel to the lost as he commands, or dividing his people. Why do we accept in full fellowship as “faithful” and “sound” those congregations that preach what we preach but don’t do what God says do? Why do we excuse slander, greed, pride, arrogance, gossip, backbiting, division, and selfishness but refuse to tolerate those who worship God with pure hearts to the best of their abilities but in error?

When we line up “churches,” such as the Baptist Church, the Methodist Church, and the Church of Christ, and say that one and only one of these churches is the true church, we are arrogating God’s judgment to ourselves. We mortals have divided ourselves into Baptists, Methodists, and Church of Christ. God did not make this division. We mortals decided who goes into which camp. Not God. We mortals chose which camp to join. We didn’t let God add us when we were saved. We joined.

But God ignores all this. He looks at whose you are, not where you are Sunday morning. You must be scripturally baptized, you must have faith, you must repent. But if you do these things because a Baptist pastor taught you to do so, and you worship God in a Baptist sanctuary on Sunday mornings, and you do all this “to the Lord,” you were nonetheless added by God to the church of Christ, you are a Christian, and you wear the true mark of a Christian, the seal of the Spirit.

All in all, I think that we would improve our lot greatly by taking Alexander Campbell’s advice to call Bible things by Bible names. The Bible never speaks of denominationalism. We shouldn’t either. If it is a sin condemned by the Bible, it is condemned by some other name. This approach will eliminate our constant ruminations on what is denominationalism and are we guilty of it. We would be far better off to consider what the Bible says about how to treat those Christians with whom we disagree and just who is a Christian. These are matters that the Bible addresses very specifically, and the answers are entirely adequate for us.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is a denomination? Are the Churches of Christ a denomination? Why or why not? If yes, when did we become a denomination?
2. What is denominationalism? Is denominationalism a sin? Are we guilty of this sin?
3. Will an otherwise saved person lose his soul due to being guilty of denominationalism?
4. Which denominations are saved? What is the Biblical test for this?

Chapter 11

Some Biblical Examples Explained

Many have been persuaded that those who worship in error are damned, even though they worship as they do “to the Lord.” Perhaps the most familiar argument is based on the Bible’s accounts of certain men and women whom God struck dead.

A. Nadab and Abihu

Nadab and Abihu were sons of Aaron, God’s first high priest under the Law of Moses. They perfectly well knew the rules God had imposed.

(Lev. 10:1-3) Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. Moses then said to Aaron, “This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: ‘Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored:’” Aaron remained silent.

This verse does not mean that all who worship in error today will lose their souls, for these reasons:

1. While the Bible does not describe the training of Nadab and Abihu, it is highly probable that, as among the first of God’s priests, they had been instructed on the procedure for offering incense. This is surely why God considered himself dishonored by their acts. Thus, Nadab and Abihu knew that they were dishonoring God before his people. They were not trying to follow his commands. They could hardly be argued to have been penitent; rather, they were rebellious and hard-hearted, and God used them to set an example.

The next few verses state that God, through Moses, prohibited Aaron and Aaron’s other sons from mourning the deaths of Nadab and Abihu. As we will consider shortly with regard to Hezekiah, this is hardly the way God deals with penitent worshippers. We would have to take a very cruel, hard-hearted view of God indeed to consider God’s harshness in this situation as defining his attitude toward well-intended worship.

2. Verse 9 strongly suggests that Nadab and Abihu were guilty of drunkenness, and this occasioned their mistake and offense. Adam Clarke says in his commentary on Leviticus,

The cabalistic commentator, Baal Hatturim, and others, have supposed from the introduction of this command here, that Aaron’s sons had sinned through excess of wine, and they had attempted to celebrate the Divine service in a state of inebriation.

3. We must contrast this story with the immediately following account of Eleazar and Ithamar. These two men were appointed to replace Nadab and Abihu. However, in vv. 16-18, Moses finds that the two men had incorrectly handled the very next ceremony! Moses was very unhappy, to say the least.

Aaron defended their mistake:

(Lev. 10:19-20) Aaron replied to Moses, "Today they sacrificed their sin offering and their burnt offering before the LORD, but such things as this have happened to me. Would the LORD have been pleased if I had eaten the sin offering today?" 20 When Moses heard this, he was satisfied.

Aaron said that he too had made mistakes in the service. It was an accident. These things happen. And Eleazar and Ithamar were not punished.

As stated in G. J. Wenham, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, The Book of Leviticus*,²⁴ "This suggests, perhaps, that God is more gracious to those who make mistakes because they fear him than to those who carelessly and impudently enter his presence as Nadab and Abihu did."

The fact that the two stories are immediately juxtaposed as they are in Leviticus 10 is intended to make a point, and the point is surely that God overlooks honest mistakes (among those in grace, of course) but does not overlook willful disobedience.²⁵

B. Ananias and Sapphira

The New Testament account of Ananias and Sapphira is used to argue that the principles of the Old Testament stories apply even today.

(Acts 4:34-35; 5:1-10) There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. ...

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."

When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

²⁴ (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co. 1979).

²⁵ Thanks to Al Maxey for bringing this argument to my attention.

About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price."

Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

Ananias and Sapphira sinned, and they died. Plainly, they were impenitent, plotting to deceive for the basest of reasons.

This sin did not occur during a worship service, did not involve church organization, and did not involve denominationalism in any sense. Any conclusion we draw regarding such matters must apply to other sins as well.

Clearly this passage does not teach that all sins, or even all lies, result in instantaneous death or damnation. This passage no more proves that those who commit the sin of denominationalism or false church organization are damned than it proves that all illiberal givers are damned.

C. Uzzah

The next frequently argued example is Uzzah.

(1 Chron. 13:7-12) They moved the ark of God from Abinadab's house on a new cart, with Uzzah and Ahio guiding it. David and all the Israelites were celebrating with all their might before God, with songs and with harps, lyres, tambourines, cymbals and trumpets. When they came to the threshing floor of Kidon, **Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark, because the oxen stumbled. The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah, and he struck him down because he had put his hand on the ark. So he died there before God.** Then David was angry because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah. David was afraid of God that day and asked, "How can I ever bring the ark of God to me?"

(1 Chron. 15:1-2,12-15) After David had constructed buildings for himself in the City of David, he prepared a place for the ark of God and pitched a tent for it. Then David said, "No one but the Levites may carry the ark of God, because the LORD chose them to carry the ark of the LORD and to minister before him forever." ...

[David] said to them, "You are the heads of the Levitical families; you and your fellow Levites are to consecrate yourselves and bring up the ark of the LORD, the God of Israel, to the place I have prepared for it. **It was because you, the Levites, did not bring it up the first time that the**

LORD our God broke out in anger against us. We did not inquire of him about how to do it in the prescribed way.” So the priests and Levites consecrated themselves in order to bring up the ark of the LORD, the God of Israel. And the Levites carried the ark of God with the poles on their shoulders, as Moses had commanded in accordance with the word of the LORD.

This passage also does not prove that all who make a mistake in the worship of God are damned. This passage deals with the mundane issue of how to move the Ark of the Covenant from place to place, not the worship of an assembly. Why limit the lesson of this passage to worship? Why not every sin?

God was displeased because David and his men had not bothered to even try to obey God's commands in this regard. They neither read the books of the Law nor inquired of God directly. They had no excuse for ignoring the will of God.

Moreover, David interprets the events as demonstrating God's anger at David and the priests for failing to honor God's instructions. After all, they had access to these materials and Uzzah likely did not.

Ultimately, the Bible doesn't say what became of Uzzah's soul. It is well within the prerogative of God to take the life of a saved person. We cringe at this thought, but surely it happens. Romans deals squarely with this topic.

(Rom. 9:19-21) One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

This is a very hard passage, but it says through inspiration that God has the power and the right to take a life (and much more) to accomplish his purposes. If he needs to make an example, no one, even Uzzah, can question the purposes of the Creator. God can take a life, but he is not required to damn the man he used to change the course of history to suit his perfect will.

We will consider Uzzah further once we've considered David's sin with Bathsheba.

D. Saul and David

One of the most striking lessons in the Bible is the contrast between God's attitudes toward Saul and David. Saul was appointed by God as Israel's first king. As was later true of David and Solomon, God gave Saul the Holy Spirit (1 Sam. 10:10; 1 Sam. 11:6). But his pride caused him to commit two sins. The first was his failure to wait on Samuel to arrive to offer sacrifices before beginning battle. When Samuel arrived to find that Saul had started without him, he stated,

(1 Sam. 13:14) “But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the Lord’s command.”

Thereafter, in a familiar story, Samuel told Saul to attack and completely destroy the Amalekites. Saul conquered them, but disobeyed Samuel’s instructions by sparing their king and livestock. When Samuel learned of this, God’s rejection of Saul was irrevocable:

(1 Sam. 15:28) Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors—to one better than you.”

Thereupon, God took his Spirit from Saul, Saul never repented, and God’s Spirit never returned.

(1 Sam. 16:14) Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him.

The story of David is very different. He also received God’s Spirit.

(1 Sam. 16:13a) So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power

And like Saul, David also sinned. However, Saul’s sin was pride. He offered a sacrifice contrary to Samuel’s instructions rather than humbly waiting for Samuel to do so. He kept livestock and the Amalekite king as trophies of his campaign. Nothing is intrinsically wrong with offering a sacrifice or retaining captured livestock or a king—unless God’s prophet has given other instructions. No one was hurt by Saul’s actions. His mistakes were easily remedied. There was no lasting harm from his sins. Nonetheless, God rejected him.

David was guilty of much worse sins: adultery, murder, and betrayal. Uriah was one of David’s 30 mighty men (2 Sam. 23:8-39). He stood beside David when Saul was trying to capture and kill him. He was with David among the Philistines. No man ever had a more loyal friend and ally than Uriah. And yet while Uriah was fighting for David, and David stayed behind in his palace, David sent for Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba, and slept with her. And she became pregnant. After trying to conceal his sin, David gave instructions that Uriah be allowed to die in battle, and on David’s order, Uriah died.

God’s prophet Nathan judged David regarding his sin.

(2 Sam. 12:13-14) Nathan replied, “The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. **But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt, the son born to you will die.**”

David repented and God forgave him. However, David still was required to suffer the earthly consequences of his actions.

One of David's psalms describe the nature of his forgiveness.

(Psalm 32:1-2) Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. **Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him** and in whose spirit is no deceit.

These very verses are used by Paul in Romans 4 to describe the nature of Christian forgiveness.

(Rom. 4:5-6) However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works

Moreover, God never took his Spirit from David (Psalm 51:11; 2 Sam. 23:1-2). Why did David keep God's Spirit and God's acceptance while Saul lost God's Spirit and was rejected? David's sins were as black as any recorded in the Bible. By any objective standard, David's sins were much worse than Saul's. And yet God forgave David and not Saul. God appointed the second son of Bathsheba as king after David: Solomon. Thus, God even accepted David's marriage to her.

By now the point is obvious. It is not the sin but the heart that determines a Christian's status before God. An arrogant, unrepentant heart will damn you, even for "trivial" sins. A penitent, faithful heart will keep you safe despite the blackest of sins. Obviously, a penitent, faithful Christian does not make a habit of or condone murder or adultery, but God's grace is higher, broader, wider, and deeper than we can ask or imagine.

If God was this generous under the Law, how much more generous will he be today?

E. David's son

Among the penalties prophesied by Nathan that David would suffer due to his sins was the death of the son that Bathsheba was pregnant with. As prophesied, the son was born, but despite David's entreaties to God, soon died.

I earlier argued with regard to Uzzah, God can and does take lives without condemning. Surely no one would argue that David's infant son was condemned by God because God took his life!

If God can take the life of a baby in response to David's sin, God could certainly take Uzzah's life in response to the sins of David and the others involved in the transport of the ark and do so without condemning Uzzah.

In both cases, God took a life to teach David a lesson. Uzzah died because the Law was being ignored as the ark was being taken to Jerusalem. With the reinstatement of the tabernacle service at the new capitol city, where Solomon would soon build the temple, it was important that the king be reminded that God expected his laws to be obeyed.

Similarly, God took the life of David's infant son to punish David for his sin with Bathsheba. In both cases, David was taught that his own sins affect others. In neither case was God punishing the person whose life he took. He was punishing David. And he was altering the course of history for purposes and with wisdom far beyond human comprehension.

F. Hezekiah

2 Chronicles contains an account that *does* apply to worship today. The temple service and the other requirements of the Law had been ignored for many years in Judah when Hezekiah became king. He re-established the temple service and ordered the celebration of Passover, which had also been long neglected.

(2 Chron. 30:1-20) Hezekiah sent word to all Israel and Judah and also wrote letters to Ephraim and Manasseh, inviting them to come to the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover to the LORD, the God of Israel. The king and his officials and the whole assembly in Jerusalem decided to celebrate the Passover in the second month. **They had not been able to celebrate it at the regular time because not enough priests had consecrated themselves and the people had not assembled in Jerusalem.** The plan seemed right both to the king and to the whole assembly.

Notice, first, that the king decided to celebrate the Passover on the wrong day, because it was too late to do otherwise.

They decided to send a proclamation throughout Israel, from Beersheba to Dan, calling the people to come to Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover to the LORD, the God of Israel. ...

The couriers went from town to town in Ephraim and Manasseh, as far as Zebulon, but the people scorned and ridiculed them. Nevertheless, some men of Asher, Manasseh and Zebulon humbled themselves and went to Jerusalem. Also in Judah **the hand of God was on the people to give them unity of mind** to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, following the word of the LORD. ...

Many of the people decided to travel to Jerusalem to honor God through this celebration.

Since many in the crowd had not consecrated themselves, the Levites had to kill the Passover lambs for all those who were not ceremonially clean and could not consecrate their lambs to the LORD. Although most of the many people who came from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar and Zebulon had not purified themselves, yet they ate the Passover, contrary to what was written.

The Law had been long forgotten and so mistakes were made as the practices commanded by God were reinstated. The penalty for taking the Passover while unclean was death, and yet the people ate, anxious to honor God.

But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, **“May the LORD, who is good, pardon everyone who sets his heart on seeking God the LORD, the God of his fathers—even if he is not clean according to the rules of the sanctuary.”** And the LORD heard Hezekiah and healed the people.

God pardoned their sin because they had “set their heart on seeking God” despite their clear violation of the Law. Moreover, despite their clear error, God’s hand was on the people to “give them unity of mind.”

If God was this forgiving of false worship under the Law, how forgiving will he be to his sons and daughters today? Why do we make doctrine and divisions based on Nadab and Abihu and fail to preach the lesson of Hezekiah’s Passover?

The only defense the worshippers had to the death penalty was that they were trying their best to honor God and had sinned only out of ignorance. And that was good enough for God.

Discussion Questions:

1. Compare and contrast the Passover celebrated by Hezekiah with the worship offered today by the independent Christian Church.
2. Why did God reject Saul and accept David? What penalties did Saul and David suffer on earth for their sins?
3. Did Uzzah go to heaven? Did the first son of David and Bathsheba go to heaven?
4. Why can God take lives and not sin?
5. What sin might we commit today that would be like the sin of Ananias and Sapphira?

Chapter 12

Final Thoughts

In this final chapter we will consider some of the issues involved in putting the lessons on grace into practice.

A. Service

Have you ever wondered why God saved you? God knows everything. Therefore, he must have known that when Jesus was sacrificed, one result would be your salvation. Think about the thousands and thousands of years of history. From the beginning of time, God had a plan for the salvation of mankind, and he knew that as a result of the plan, you would be saved! He repeatedly intervened in history to achieve this very result. Why?

(Eph. 2:8-11) For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, **created in Christ Jesus to do good works**, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

(Eph. 4:11-13) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, **to prepare God’s people for works of service**, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

(Gal. 5:13) You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, **serve one another in love**.

(Heb. 9:13-14) The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, **so that we may serve the living God!**

Why were we “created in Christ Jesus” when we were saved? “To do good works.” Why did the blood of Christ “cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death”? So we may “serve the living God.”

Why did God save us? To hear *a cappella* four-part harmony every Sunday morning? To have church buildings built? To have us argue and divide over every nuance of scriptural interpretation? No, we were saved to serve.

Well then, what is this service that we are to do? The passage from Ephesians tells us that we are to do good works “that God prepared in advance for us to do.” What kind of works are these? Clearly, disputing over doctrine does not fit into this description. Neither does going to church. I can only think of these things: living the Christian life, praising God, helping those in

need, and seeking and saving the lost. And of these four, the last two best fit the description of works “prepared in advance.”

(Rom. 12:1-2) Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to **offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.** Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

The Bible says that offering ourselves to God is our worship. It is not *like* worship; it *is* worship. Sacrificial living is the only thing that the New Testament calls an “act of worship.”

(Rom. 12:3-8) For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

More precisely, our worship is using whatever talents God gave us in his service. And everyone has at least one talent. We *all* must be servants.

This is the ultimate pattern of worship. A church that conducts its assemblies exactly as God would desire but that does not serve God has no more complied with God’s “pattern of worship” than a pagan church. How pleased could God be with a church that has a perfect Sunday morning assembly but that fails to care for the poor of its community?

Notice also that the commands are not to congregations—they are to individual Christians. We often take a football-spectator approach to Christianity. When the Dallas Cowboys won the Super Bowl, I celebrated the great victory and felt like a winner. I had cheered them on from my living room, but I had really had nothing to do with the win. And I should not be surprised that I have not received a Super Bowl ring or a Super Bowl check.

We cheer on our preachers, elders, and deacons. When they do something well, we celebrate with them. But all too often, we are celebrating the victories that Christ won through others. Our only participation is sitting in the pew, feeling good about ourselves because we chose to attend a church with an effective ministry. We are on the winning team! But God doesn’t save teams. He saves individuals. When he saved you, he did so so that *you* would worship him through service.

The church is a service organization. And except for those who are physically unable, our talents (skills, energies, money, time, etc.) must be used in service and good works. You are an

ungrateful, self-centered sinner if you just sit in your pew and do not work for God. And you are far from being truly penitent. The lazy Christian is in a condition of serious jeopardy.

Many have this attitude because this is how we act. We somehow have given the impression that all God wants out of us is the following:

- Regular attendance.
- Compliance with the Church's traditional interpretation of the pattern of worship and pattern of church organization.
- A moral lifestyle.
- A modest weekly contribution out of our excess.

Period. I know that no one has ever actually said that. But that is what we believe and practice. If a brother does those four things and dies, at his funeral he will be eulogized as "faithful" and "sound." And we will mean it. A man with these qualities and no more will readily be put up for deacon in many churches. Upon moving to another church, such a member will be commended to the new eldership as "in good standing."

Studies show that only a minority of our members actively participate in the programs of the church. As little as 20% can be a very good percentage of working members. This means that 80% or more of our church attenders are consumers of services only, and yet we accept them as totally normal Christians in no need of repentance. We need to repent. We need to reconsider the meaning of our baptism. We need to put greater emphasis on serving God and less on just having the right position on the issues. We need to get to work.

B. Reflections on the importance of unity

The overriding theme of this book is Christian unity. Division among Christians is a sin, so much so that Jesus brought to this world a religion designed to allow God to accept his children despite their sins, including their doctrinal failings. We must accept those whom God has accepted.

The Bible repeatedly and vehemently condemns divisiveness. Why? I believe that God's attitude toward division is based on a number of reasoned judgments:

Division distracts from the Lord's work. If we took the money and energy that we presently direct toward condemning one another and directed it toward evangelism and benevolence, God's kingdom would be far larger and the poor would be far better off.

Division wastes money and talent. Some Christians take offense at blunt references to money, but God's work on earth requires money, lots of money.

As any economist will tell you, there are economies of scale in any enterprise. When a church splits, money is wasted. The only people who profit from two 150-member congregations

where there ought to be one 300-member church are the utility companies, building contractors, money lenders, and Satan. Obviously, the Lord's money can be spent more efficiently in a larger church. Instead of two pulpit ministers, the two churches can afford one pulpit minister and a youth minister. Regardless of whether these two may cost less in combination than the two pulpit ministers would, the true efficiency is in an improved ministry. For no more money, the combined church will do a far superior job of bringing its children up in the Lord and lose nothing in terms of pulpit ministry.

The combined church will also have a lower combined power bill, water bill, building payment, lawn care expense, etc. While the building for the combined church will need twice as many pews, it will only need one baptistry, one communion preparation room, and one library. The combined church will have a superior library and superior building.

The church staff will only have one bulletin to put out each week and two sermons to prepare (instead of four), etc. The combined church will waste no time competing with another like church for new members moving into town.

The members of the combined church will see their talents used more efficiently. A member with the talent to teach adults regarding family issues will be used on a more regular basis for his special skills, because there will be more than one class that he can help teach. A member with the talent to work with teens will be able to benefit twice as many teenagers for the same effort. A larger church is more likely to have the members with the talents required to run an effective evangelism or benevolence ministry.

So why do we insist on splitting into 150-member churches? Why aren't our congregations bigger? The reason is two-fold. First, we have been split into small churches for so long that many of us feel uncomfortable in a large church. We don't like going to church and seeing people we don't know. We like to feel important, like a big fish in a small pond. We want to be noticed when we are absent. We want to be consulted on decisions. We want to be known by nearly everyone at church.

Feelings such as these are entirely understandable, but they are entirely selfish. I must admit to sharing some of these same feelings, but I try to force myself to look beyond my needs to my Lord's needs. Does keeping a church small serve Jesus? Does having two churches benefit his kingdom more than one united church?

Many of us don't want to be confronted with opinions different from our own. We can't stand change. Big churches are necessarily more diverse churches, and the more Christians we meet with every week, the more we will have to deal with friends, brothers, and sisters that we disagree with.

Division denies us the incomparable blessings of unity. I think that one reason that God wants us to sing is so that we will feel the benefits of union. A worship hall filled with singing Christians thrills the heart like nothing else. A song service in an auditorium that is 70% empty begs for more Christians. Just so, if we see God's kingdom as consisting of only those who agree with us on every point, then the church appears small, weak, and struggling. We find

ourselves demoralized. Viewing the church as including all baptized, penitent believers shows God's kingdom to be vastly larger and more effective than many of us had ever dared dream.

Division wastes our energies on internal fighting. Satan is a worthier opponent than we sometimes realize. We cannot defeat him while we waste our time, talents, money, and energies in fighting one another. Souls are being lost every minute while we are fighting over whether to comfort the saved with or without soloists, applause, and drama. How frivolous! Satan is so clever that he can distract us from doing what we know to do by fooling us into confusing sin (disputations and division) with service. We need to go on the offensive. We need to stop pretending that defending our opinions is "defending the faith" and instead make Satan defend the world from our onslaught. Jesus said that the gates of hell would not prevail against our faith. Let's put him to the test. Let's attack!

C. Conclusions

All Christians possess the literal, actual indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This indwelling powerfully promotes our faith and repentance so that we can grow in Christ. He is received at baptism and is only lost if we also lose our souls.

We are saved by accepting Jesus as God's Son (faith) and our Lord (repentance). Salvation is received at the point of baptism by immersion. We receive the Holy Spirit at the same time.

We remain saved so long as we continue to accept Jesus as God's Son and as our Lord. This is so despite our sins, both of conduct and doctrine.

Our salvation is continuous. So long as we possess the Spirit, no matter how feebly, we are saved and all our sins are forgiven. All Christians at all times remain as forgiven as they were the moment they were baptized.

However, we can give up our salvation. All we have to do is cease to have faith or repentance. Of special danger is letting grace become a license for intentional sin. As soon as we knowingly sin and count on grace to forgive us, we have failed to repent. This attitude can cause us to become so hardhearted that the Holy Spirit will give up trying to bring us to repentance, because we cease to be capable of repenting. At this point, we have "fallen away," and we are no longer saved, nor will we ever be saved again. The Holy Spirit has perfect knowledge of whether we can be brought to repentance. So long as the possibility exists, the Holy Spirit will not give us up. But when our consciences are too insensitive to what Jesus wants, we cease to be saved—forever.

We do not earn our salvation by our good works. Works only matter if they are the product of making Jesus your Lord. There will be many who have done more good than you or me who are lost, because the good they did was not for the sake of Jesus. But if Jesus is our Lord, his Spirit and our recognizing him as Lord will cause us to produce a lifetime of service in response to his salvation.

The service that Jesus wants is based on the talents he gave us. And our abilities are to be used to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the widows and orphans, and to seek and save the lost. We may personally do these things, or we may help others do these things, by giving, teaching, training, organizing, or encouraging. But we must do something that ultimately produces the fruit that Jesus died for us to bear.

We must labor long and hard to never let Satan divide God's people. We must emphasize and re-emphasize that God saves based on faith and repentance and that those he saves, he unites. Other matters cannot be allowed to divide us.

Unity of all Christians is God's will. God will curse those who divide brother from brother, but God will bless the peacemakers.

Discussion Questions:

1. Would it be possible for these principles to be applied in your church? Why or why not? Would your church be better off if they were put into practice?
2. Do we adequately teach the duty of Christians to perform service? What percentage of your congregation is active in the works of the church?
3. What new programs does your church need? How should they be organized, staffed, and funded?
4. Are there other churches of Christ in you community? Why are their two (or more) congregations? Would Jesus be glorified by combining the two churches?
5. What are the limitations on mergers? When is a church too big? When is a merger ill-advised?