
Castles In The Air

A Bible Study

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P R E F A C E

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This paper was originally written in July of 2000. It is based on over two years of my own Bible study and research begun in January 1998 and concluded in July 2000. The supporting material for these studies (encompassing Scripture lists, Greek word definitions and Bible commentaries) take up well over five hundred pages.

I have examined some very basic Scriptural issues, such as salvation and authority, but I also examined some of the practices and doctrines of the church. I have relied on my own experience over 15 years as well as written material from various leaders and excerpts from sermons and lessons.

In these Bible studies, I tried to be as detailed and thorough as possible, given the seriousness of the subject matter. These studies were never intended to be made public on a wide scale however. I organized them into a more readable format only so that I could present my conclusions to close friends here in my church, particularly our lead evangelist who was and still is, a very dear and beloved friend.

I make no claims to great scholarship, nor do I presume to have discovered anything new. These studies were simply one man's search for a deeper understanding of the will of God for his life, that is all.

These studies are not a personal attack on any man, church or group of churches. In fact, I have refused to post these studies where they might be seen as such. Nonetheless, if they come across that way to anyone, I humbly ask you to forgive me in advance, for that is most assuredly not my desire or intent.

A great deal has changed since these studies were written, and some doctrines described inside are no longer taught. The climate now seems to be entirely different than that of three years ago. There now seems to be a real willingness to re-examine long held beliefs. It is my prayer that in some way, however small, these words can help in this process.

Grace and peace to all,
A voice in the wilderness

1. EXAMINING THE FOUNDATION

If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

Henry David Thoreau
Walden, Chapter 18

Over the past two years I have been in the process of re-examining my core beliefs as a Christian to be sure that they were built on sound, biblical foundations. What follows is the result of my studies.

I was baptized in 1985 in the Boston Church of Christ. This summer will mark 15 years since I became a Christian. In the spring of 1998 we began studying First Principles here in my church. It had been about three years since I had last taken this class. One day, as I was going over The Word study, I came to the part in the study guide that says "you must question what your religious leaders teach." I paused and thought about that statement for a long while.

I began thinking of all the different things I have said (and heard other people say) over the years while doing this study. I often used such phrases as "you've got to be willing to question everything you've been taught, whether it came from your parents who you love or your religious leaders who you respect. If what they taught you doesn't match up with the Bible, you've got to be willing to do what God says." Another phrase often used was "people can be sincere, but sincerity doesn't equal truth. You can be sincerely wrong."

At this point of the study, we would often warn people of the dangers of following religious leaders unquestioningly. We would talk about how people often accept what they're taught without ever going back to the Scriptures to see if it is accurate. These people simply trust their leaders because they think they know more than they do. As a result of this, they're following all sorts of incorrect teachings and doctrines.

The solution to this problem, we always point out, is that you have to question what your leaders teach so that you can evaluate its scriptural accuracy. Ultimately however, you must be willing to just live by the Bible, even if it means going against the opinions of

your friends, family or church leaders. Even if it goes against everything you've ever believed in the past. Obedience to God must always come first. Finally, we always conclude the Word study with the challenge to "be a Berean" and to go back over this study to see if everything we have taught them is true.

It suddenly occurred to me that I could not remember the last time I had actively questioned what I had been taught. I began to ask myself some hard questions:

- *Why* do I believe the things I believe? Is it because I am thoroughly convinced of them from my personal study of the Scriptures or is it simply because I have believed these things for the last 13 years?
- Am I willing to objectively question what my leaders teach?
- Am I really willing to "just go by the Bible" even if it brings me into conflict with what I have been taught?
- What is my faith based on: my own convictions or my leaders convictions?

The implications of these questions were enormous. I decided that morning that I was going to re-examine my core beliefs and re-evaluate their Scriptural accuracy. Most importantly, I was going to do so with complete objectivity. Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines objective as follows:

Objective - expressing or dealing with facts or conditions as perceived without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations

It was not that I felt this sudden distrust of my leaders. When I think back over the years of some of the leaders I have known personally, my heart is filled with admiration, love and respect. Each one of these guys holds a very special place in my heart. They are heroes to me, and I am forever grateful and thankful for them.

Yet the questions remained: what if these people, who I love so dearly, are teaching something that is Biblically incorrect? How would I even know if I didn't examine the Scriptures objectively? Was I really willing to go the next step of asking "what if my entire church is wrong? What if what I have believed and taught is wrong?" Was I willing to even consider that possibility?

In the past, whenever I had questions about a teaching that came from my leaders, I would invariably conclude the following:

- These men are more spiritual than I am.
- They have been Christians longer than I have.
- They know the Scriptures better than I do
- Therefore, I will trust what they teach.

I don't mean to imply that I unthinkingly accepted everything I was taught without having any kind of Scriptural basis for my belief. It's simply that if a certain issue was not directly addressed in the Scriptures, and differing views were possible, I would usually side with my leaders.

Yet, I suddenly realized the danger in the way I had been thinking. I realized that I didn't have confidence in my own ability to find the truth. As someone who has always wrestled with a low opinion of myself, I often felt that I wasn't smart enough to understand the Scriptures the way my leaders did. If I somehow concluded something different than my leaders, I would virtually always lay my conclusions aside with the thinking that "these guys are much smarter than I am."

I decided that morning that I would no longer think in this way. There must be sound Biblical justification for every belief that I have and these beliefs must come from my own careful, prayerful and objective study of the Scriptures regardless of what my leaders teach.

In order to be completely objective and unbiased in my re-examination of the Bible however, I had to clear certain mental hurdles in my head. Somehow I had developed the idea that to disagree with my leaders (who are some of my very best friends in the world) was to be disrespectful to them. Furthermore, it was disloyal and unsupportive. It simply didn't occur to me that you could disagree in a righteous manner without ever being disrespectful, disloyal or unsupportive. I searched the Scriptures for some direction on this issue:

Acts 17:11-12

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

Acts 17:11 *New Living Translation*

And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They *searched the Scriptures* day after day to check up on Paul and Silas, to see if they were really teaching the truth.

Rom 12:2

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.

1 Cor 2:1-5

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ *so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom*, but on God's power.

2 Cor 13:5

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; *test yourselves*. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you - unless, of course, you fail the test?

1 Thessalonians 5:21

Test everything. Hold on to the good.

1 Tim 4:16

Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

2 Timothy 2:15

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who *correctly handles the word of truth*

I John 4:11

Dear friends, *do not believe every spirit*, but *test the spirits* to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Rev. 2:2

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that *you have tested those who claim to be apostles* but are not, and have found them false.

From these verses, I saw that God fully *expects* us to examine ourselves (to see if our faith is genuine), to examine our leaders (to make sure their lifestyle is Godly) and to examine what we are taught (to make sure it is sound doctrine). We simply don't have the option to just accept what our leaders teach us without searching the Scriptures for ourselves. It doesn't matter who they are or how much we love them, we cannot live on a faith borrowed from someone else.

Later that year, I read an extremely thought provoking book called *Common Sense* written by David Bercot. The book discusses the issue of reading the scriptures without an agenda and without any preconceived ideas. Rather than summarize the book myself, I will quote from it directly:

"...this is primarily a book about honesty. By the term "honesty", I'm not referring to restraint from stealing or honesty. Rather I'm speaking of *intellectual* and *spiritual* honesty. That is, the willingness to be totally objective in the pursuit of God's truth. Intellectually honest Christians have the desire and ability to see all sides of any spiritual or theological issue. They are far more concerned about *what is true* than they are about defending their own personal positions or the positions of their denomination or church. " p. 2

"If we are convinced that we already know what the correct teachings of Scripture are, then we can read Scripture over and over and yet never see anything different from what we already believe." p. 13

"Because of our preconceived beliefs, most Christians have never truly experienced what it is like to actually *listen* to what the Bible writers are saying. Instead, when we read Scripture, all of the preconceived ideas that were inculcated in us as children or as new Christians drown out the actual words of the Bible. We see the words on the pages of our Bibles. And we *think* we are hearing those words. But in reality, we are often hearing only the words of our teachers, not the words of the Bible." p. 16

"the first common sense principle of interpretation is: to find truth, you must start with a blank slate ... How do you know when you are reading Scripture with a blank slate? The answer is: When you have no theological system to defend. When you have no prior conclusions to which Scripture must be molded." p. 18

After reading this book, I tried to identify my preconceived ideas about the Scriptures. I made a decision that I was going to read through the New Testament as if I had never read it before and without the assumption that my current beliefs were accurate. I was going to search the Scriptures no matter where it led me. There would be no "sacred cows" of belief that would be shielded from the searching light of objective examination.

I also decided that I was going to fully accept the possibility that my entire church could be wrong on crucial Scriptural issues. This is an extremely important point. It's one thing to realize that you personally have been wrong about a given issue. It's a humbling thing, to be sure. But you just acknowledge it and you move on.

It is a drastically different story however, when you come to believe that your entire church and your leaders are wrong about something. Things are not so simple in this case. Coming to a conclusion that differs from what they teach can (and often will) bring you into conflict with them. No one relishes conflict with those in authority, especially with individuals you have come to love and respect. It is therefore much more difficult to confront errors in your church's doctrine than it is in your own belief system. Nonetheless, I was determined to read through the Scriptures without assuming that any of our beliefs were accurate.

The first book in the New Testament that I read with this "blank slate" was the book of Acts. I was immediately struck by the fact that many of the things we do are nowhere to be found in Acts: people became Christians quickly and without ever going through "the

Studies", there were no "bible talks", no assigned "discipleship partners", no church hierarchies with leadership titles such as "sector leader", no mention of special contribution multipliers, no church budgets, no stats for visitors or bible studies, etc.

Something just didn't seem right to me. The lives of the Christians in Acts seemed so uncomplicated by church guidelines or rules yet so full of simplicity, power and freedom. I began to feel that perhaps somewhere, somehow we had gone wrong as a church and that in seeking to help Christians grow by introducing all these things, we had instead complicated and confused Christianity.

Yet I also felt, as I read through Acts, that my own understanding of the Scriptures needed to deepen. Reading the Scriptures without any preconceived ideas is of no use if you do not know how to properly handle what you're reading. I felt that my ability to understand deep or problematic scriptural issues was inadequate. So I decided that I would begin studying the topic of Biblical interpretation. My goal was simply to better understand the Scriptures so that I could accurately discern the will of God in my life. The following Scriptures speak to this very issue:

2 Ti.2:15

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth

2 Cor 4:2

Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

2 Peter 3:15-16

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. ¹⁶ He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

Paul's admonition to Timothy in 2 Tim 2:15 teaches us that we must be sure to "correctly" handle God's word. This obviously implies the ability to "incorrectly" handle the

Scriptures. Paul told the Corinthians that he didn't distort the word of God but instead he simply set forth the truth plainly. Similarly, Peter writes that Paul's letters and the other Scriptures contain some things which are hard to understand and which can be distorted.

It is therefore vitally important for us to examine the way in which we "handle" God's Word to be sure that we are doing it correctly and not distorting what it says.

2. BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

The first book I read was *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart. The first issue they tackle is the idea that "you don't need to interpret the Bible, you just need to obey it." This instantly struck me as familiar because those are virtually the identical words we use when we do the Word study.

However, they go on to show the error of this line of thinking:

"The aim of interpretation is simple: to get at the 'plain meaning of the text'... The test of good interpretation is that it makes good sense of the text ... But if the plain meaning is what interpretation is all about, then why interpret? Why not just read? Does not the plain meaning come simply from reading? In a sense, yes. But in a truer sense, such an argument is both naïve and unrealistic because of two factors: the nature of the reader and the nature of scripture." P. 14

When we tell people "don't interpret, just obey", we are actually defining the word "interpret" incorrectly. What we *mean* to say is "you can't make the Bible say anything you want it to say." Yet in the context in which we use it, we portray interpretation as something negative, something to be avoided. This is completely wrong! The word is defined by Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary as follows:

Interpret

Main Entry: in· ter· pret

Function: verb

1 : to explain or tell the meaning of : present in understandable terms

2 : to conceive in the light of individual belief, judgment, or circumstance

3 : to represent by means of art : bring to realization by performance or direction

Interpretation

Main Entry: in· ter· pre· ta· tion

Function: noun

1 : the act or the result of interpreting : EXPLANATION

2 : a particular adaptation or version of a work, method, or style

3 : teaching technique that combines factual with stimulating explanatory information

To interpret means to give meaning. Therefore, we *must* interpret the Scriptures because we must give them meaning. The book goes on to describe why we need to learn how to interpret the Bible:

1. Everyone is an interpreter - the act of giving meaning to the Scriptures is itself interpretation.

"The first reason one needs to learn *how* to interpret is that, whether one likes it or not, every reader is at the same time an interpreter. That is, most of us assume as we read that we also understand what we read. We also tend to think that *our understanding* is the same thing as the Holy Spirit's or human author's *intent*... Sometimes, what we bring to the text, unintentionally to be sure, leads us astray, or else causes us to read all kinds of foreign ideas into the text."

2. The English translation we read is the result of interpretation.

"The reader of an English Bible is already involved in interpretation. For translation is itself a (necessary) form of translation... Translators are regularly called upon to make choices regarding meanings and *their* choices are going to affect how *you* understand." P. 15

3. The Bible isn't always easy to understand.

"... not all plain meanings are equally plain to all... Given all this diversity, both within and without the church, and all the difference among scholars who supposedly know 'the rules', it is no wonder that some argue for no interpretation, just reading. But as we have seen, that is a false option. The antidote to *bad* interpretation is not *no* interpretation, but *good* interpretation, based on common sense guidelines."

The point in this paragraph is that interpretation itself is not the problem, nor is it something to be avoided. Bad interpretation is what leads us astray. This is precisely why we need to learn how to interpret - to handle the Scriptures properly.

In his book *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, Robert Stein writes:

"The importance of interpreting the Bible correctly cannot be overemphasized. The claim that the Bible is inspired and that it is God's revelation to humanity is ultimately of little value without some understanding of how that divine revelation should be interpreted.

When we describe the Bible as "infallible" or "without error," these terms are meaningless if we do not know how to interpret it. What do we mean when we say that the Bible is without error? What is it that is infallible? Is it my understanding of the Bible? Is it yours? ... Who gives meaning to a text?" p.10

It struck me as completely bizarre that the most basic, elementary aspect of properly understanding the Scriptures is taught incorrectly in our First Principles study. It was alarming to me that this vitally important point has been taught incorrectly for the past 20 years! How could we be so wrong on something so simple, so basic, so absolutely crucial to handling the Scriptures accurately?

The following "Rules of Biblical Interpretation" are a good overview of some of the principles that we should follow. I don't remember where I found them but they illustrate some of the most important guidelines we must follow to correctly handle the Scriptures:

Rules of Biblical Interpretation

1) The rule of DEFINITION:

What does the word mean? Any study of Scripture must begin with careful study of words. Define your terms and then keep to the terms defined. The interpreter should conscientiously abide by the plain meaning of the words. This quite often may require using a Hebrew/English or Greek/English lexicon in order to make sure that the sense of the English translation is understood.

2) The rule of USAGE:

It must be remembered that the Old Testament was written originally by, to and for Jews. The words and idioms must have been intelligible to them - just as the words of Christ when talking to them must have been. The majority of the New Testament likewise was written in a Greco-Roman (and to a lesser extent Jewish) culture and it is important to not impose our modern usage into our interpretation. It is not worth much to interpret a great many phrases and histories if one's interpretations are shaded by pre-conceived notions and cultural biases, thereby rendering an inaccurate and ineffectual lesson.

3) The rule of CONTEXT:

The meaning must be gathered from the context. Every word you read must be understood in the light of the words that come before and after it. Many passages will not be understood at all, or understood incorrectly, without the help afforded by the context.

4) The rule of TIME or DISPENSATIONS

An important aspect of understanding the Scriptures is the concept of "dispensations", or periods of time in which God deals with mankind a certain way. The two primary dispensations or periods are:

i. The Dispensation of Law

This period covers most of the Old Testament. During this dispensation God held man accountable to obeying the Law as it was given to Moses on Mount Sinai. This period lasted until Jesus' death on the cross, or more specifically until Acts Chapter 2 when the Gospel was preached for the first time.

ii. The Dispensation of Grace

This is the period in which we now live. Being "under grace" means that God no longer holds us accountable to the Laws and regulations of the Old Covenant.

Our relationship with God, therefore, is fundamentally different than that of the Jews of the Old Testament.

J. Edwin Hartill, in his book *Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics*, writes the following:

"Unless one understand the dispensations, one cannot understand God's Book, and it becomes a Book of confusion and contradictions.

Definition - a dispensation is a period of time during which God deals in a particular way with man in respect to sin and man's responsibility. The word "dispensation" means "administration" and is first found in 1 Cor. 9:17.

There are statements in the Bible which apparently are contradictory, and to avoid confusion one must follow the rules given below in dividing the Truth. Not only must Truth be divided into dispensations, but it must be divided in the same dispensation. One must never take truth that belongs to a past dispensation and bring it up to the present."

5) The rule of HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The interpreter must have some awareness of the life and society of the times in which the Scripture was written. The spiritual principle will be timeless but often can't be properly appreciated without some knowledge of the background. If the interpreter can have in his mind what the writer had in his mind when he wrote - without adding any excess baggage from the interpreter's own culture or society - then the true thought of the Scripture can be captured resulting in an accurate interpretation.

6) The rule of LOGIC:

Interpretation is merely logical reasoning. When interpreting Scripture, the use of reason is everywhere to be assumed. Does the interpretation make sense? The Bible was given to us in the form of human language and therefore appeals to human reason - it invites investigation. It is to be interpreted as we would any other volume: applying the laws of language and grammatical analysis.

7) The rule of PRECEDENT:

We must not violate the known usage of a word and invent another for which there is no precedent. Just as a judge's chief occupation is the study of previous cases, so must the interpreter use precedents in order to determine whether they really support an alleged doctrine.

8) The rule of UNITY:

The parts of Scripture being interpreted must be construed with reference to the significance of the whole. An interpretation must be consistent with the rest of Scripture. An excellent example of this is the doctrine of the Trinity. No single passage teaches it, but it is consistent with the teaching of the whole of Scripture (e.g. the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are referred to individually as God; yet the Scriptures elsewhere teach there is only one God).

9) The rule of INFERENCE:

An inference is a fact reasonably implied from another fact. It is a logical consequence. It derives a conclusion from a given fact or premise. It is the deduction of one proposition from another proposition. Such inferential facts or propositions are sufficiently binding when their truth is established by competent and satisfactory evidence.

Common Errors in Biblical Interpretation

The book *Exegetical Fallacies* by D.A. Carson goes into great detail about common mistakes people make when trying to interpret the Scriptures. Here are some of the most common errors according to the book:

1. Root Word Fallacy

This fallacy assumes that the "root" of a word holds the key to its meaning. The problem is that the root from which the word comes from is often completely different from the current meaning of the word in question. For example, the English word "nice" comes from the Latin word "necius" meaning ignorant. The point is that the etymology of a word has little bearing on what it actually means.

2. Reading the definitions of English words into the original Greek text

The best example of this mistake is the use of the Greek word "hilaron" which means "cheerful" (as in God loves a cheerful giver). It is often mentioned that this is where we get the English word for "hilarious." It is then said that God loves a "hilarious" giver or that we should give "hilariously." The problem is that the word in Greek means "cheerful" not "hilarious." The fact that hundreds of years later a word in the English language has been derived from "hilaron" does not in any way change its original meaning from "cheerful" to "hilarious."

Another example is the Greek word for power, "dynamis" as in Rom 1:16 (the power of God). This is where we get the English word for dynamite. Once again, the English word derived hundreds of years later has no bearing whatsoever on the definition of the Greek word.

Yet another example is the word for "devoted" in Acts 2:42. You often hear people teach that this Greek word is the source for our word for "addicted." The preacher then goes on to say that what this passage really means is that "the disciples were addicted to the fellowship."

First of all, let's look at the word in the Greek. The word translated as "devoted" in the

NIV is the Greek word "proskartereo." Strong's Dictionary defines it as follows:

to be earnest towards, i.e. (to a thing) to persevere, be constantly diligent, or (in a place) to attend assiduously all the exercises, or (to a person) to adhere closely to (as a servitor):

Vine's Expository Dictionary defines it like this:

"to be steadfast," a strengthened form of kartereo (pros, "towards," intensive, karteros, "strong"), denotes to continue steadfastly in a thing and give unremitting care to it, e. g., Rom 13:6, of rulers in the discharge of their functions. In the Sept., Num 13:21.

Neither of these dictionaries make any mention of the word addiction. The reason for this is that the word addiction wasn't even invented when Luke wrote the book of Acts.

Now lets take a look at the definition for "addiction." Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines it as follows:

Main Entry: ad· dic· tion

Function: noun

Date: 1599

1 : the quality or state of being addicted <addiction to reading>

2 : compulsive need for and use of a habit-forming substance (as heroin, nicotine, or alcohol) characterized by tolerance and by well-defined physiological symptoms upon withdrawal; *broadly*:persistent compulsive use of a substance known by the user to be harmful

According to Webster, this word didn't come into use until 1599 A.D., almost 1,500 years after the New Testament was written. Other dictionaries note that the English word for addict does not come from the Greek word "proskartereo" but rather from the Latin word "addictio."

My point is simply that you cannot say that "the disciples were addicted to the fellowship." That's just plain wrong. The word Luke uses in Acts 2:42 means "devoted" not "addicted."

Why is this such a big deal? Because it shows how we can subtly change the meaning of a Biblical passage by incorrectly defining key words.

3. Assuming words have just one meaning

Just as in English, Greek words often have many meanings. It is context that determines which meaning applies. For example, take the English word: "watch." If I assumed that this word only means "a timepiece usually worn on the wrist" I would have great difficulty making sense out of the following statements:

- Watch your step.
- The theft of nuclear secrets occurred under Clinton's watch.

Carson writes:

"We sometimes fail to appreciate how wide the total semantic range of a word is; therefore when we come to perform the exegesis of a particular passage, we do not adequately consider the potential options and unwittingly exclude possibilities that might include the correct one." P. 57

As an example, consider the use of the word "ekklesia" (translated as "assembly") in Acts 7:38. You would have a hard time making sense out of this passage if you assume that ekklesia always refers to the Christian church.

Acts 7:37-38

"This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.' ³⁸ He was in the **assembly** ("ekklesia") in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us.

4. Selective use of evidence

Using only a few scriptures to support your views. The answer to this is to study every verse that has to do with the word or topic we are studying.

"As a general rule, the more complex and/or emotional the issue, the greater the tendency to select only part of the evidence, prematurely construct a grid, and so filter the rest of the evidence through the grid so that it is robbed of any substance."
P. 93

"What gives the interpreter the right to link certain verses together and not others? The point is that all such linking eventually produces a grid that affects the interpretation of other texts." P. 139

5. The false dilemma (the law of the excluded middle)

Framing an issue in terms of either/or when in fact there may be some perfectly reasonable middle ground. For example, assuming we're either saved by faith alone or by works. The fact is that faith and works are not mutually exclusive but rather work together.

6. Failure to recognize distinctions

The fallacy that argues that because X and Y are alike in certain respects they are alike in all respects.

- a. A dog is an animal
- b. A cat is an animal
- c. Therefore, a dog is a cat.

7. Bad logic

Thinking that certain arguments are good when a moment's reflection exposes them as worthless. (see example above)

- a. When it rains the sidewalk is wet
- b. The sidewalk is wet
- c. Therefore, it has rained.

8. Eisogesis - inserting preconceived ideas into the meaning of a passage

"The fallacy in this case lies in thinking that one's own experience and interpretation of reality are the proper framework for interpreting the biblical text. In other words, we read our own meaning into the text instead of trying to get the plain meaning out of the text.

Unless we recognize the "distance" that separates us from the text being studied, we will overlook differences of outlook or vocabulary and unwittingly we will read our mental baggage into the text without pausing to ask if that is appropriate. We are truly prepared to understand a text only after we have understood some of the differences between what the text is talking about and what we gravitate to on the same subject." P. 103

9. Purely emotional appeals

"Emotional appeals sometimes mask issues or hide the defectiveness of the underlying argument. An emotional appeal based on truth reflects sincerity and conviction; an emotional appeal used as a substitute for truth is worthless. The fallacy lies in thinking that emotion can substitute for reason, or that it has logical force." P. 106

An example of an emotional appeal you might here in our church is "if you have a problem with what I'm saying its because you have a problem with God." I have personally heard this many times.

10. Unwarranted associative jumps

"This occurs when a word or phrase triggers off an associated idea, concept or experience that bears no close relation to the text at hand, yet is used to interpret the text." P. 115

As the tired old cliché goes: "Text without context becomes a pretext for a proof text"

11. False statements

"It is astonishing how often a book or article gives false information; and if we rely

on such a work too heavily, our exegesis will be badly skewed. Go to the primary sources!"

12. The non sequitur (Latin for "does not follow")

This refers to conclusions which "do not follow" from the evidence and arguments presented. Many times it is the result of muddled, sloppy thinking or false premises.

13. Cavalier dismissal

"The fallacy lies in thinking that an opponents argument has been handled when in fact it has merely been written off by statements such as "that's ridiculous." P. 118

14. Inadequate analogies

Supposing that a particular analogy sheds light on a biblical text when in fact the analogy is demonstrably inadequate or inappropriate.

15. Misuse of leading words such as "obviously" or similar expressions.

"It is improper to use such expressions when opposing arguments have not been decisively refuted, and it is a fallacy to think the expressions themselves add anything substantial to the argument." P. 122

16. Changing the meaning of words

In his excellent book *The Twisted Scriptures*¹, Carl Ketcherside identifies two additional means by which the Scriptures can be misapplied or as he puts it, "twisted":

"Another way by which the scriptures can be twisted is by assigning an acquired meaning to a word and then proceeding as if this was the meaning accredited to it when used by the Spirit."

¹ Not to be confused with the book entitled *Twisted Scriptures* by Mary Alice Chrnalagar. Ketcherside's book was written in 1965 and is available online: <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/wketcherside/tts/index.html>

He quotes Alexander Campbell:

“From this source spring most of our *doctrinal* controversies. Men's opinions, expressed in their own terms, are often called Bible truths.”

The mistake he is pointing out is that of thinking that your own personal definition of a word is what that word actually means.

Summary

Based on my studies over the past two years, I have come to the conclusion that we as a church routinely and systematically mishandle the Scriptures and as a result, we have reached incorrect conclusions on a whole range of vitally important issues.

This mishandling is the result of ignoring the time honored principles of biblical interpretation. It is the result of making virtually all of the errors I have described above.

3. THE SOURCE OF OUR CHURCH'S BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Obviously, reading a few books does not suddenly make you an expert or an authority. I do not claim to be either. In fact, I realize now how little I actually know and how much more I must learn. The result of my studies of biblical interpretation however was that I gained a better understanding of how to approach the Scriptures. I now had a solid framework in which I could examine the word of God with greater clarity.

Nonetheless, I noticed something strange happening by late 1998. I was now hearing Midweek and Sunday lessons differently and what I heard began to disturb me. The brothers teaching on Sunday or Wednesday would make statements from time to time that seemed to completely violate the principles of biblical interpretation that I had just learned. They also seemed to make the common mistakes that I learned about in D.A. Carson's book.

What was strange to me was that I had heard these exact teachings many times before. Yet I had never actually gone back and verified what I was hearing. I didn't go back as the Bereans did and "see if everything was true." More importantly, I had now learned to identify bad interpretation, something I wasn't able to do before.

I realized that these problematic teachings did not originate with my local zone leader or sector leader. They came from much higher. I wanted to find out the exact source of these teachings which now seemed highly questionable to me. I visited our web site and printed out the "Restoration through Revolution" articles (I will refer to these articles hereafter as "RtR"). These articles were written by the most influential leader in our group of churches. These are as close to anything we have to an official statement of the views and beliefs of the International Churches of Christ. I was not expecting what came next.

As I studied these articles, I was shocked by what I read. I found them to be riddled with all sorts of serious problems such as: bad interpretation by misuse and misunderstanding of Scripture, faulty logic, emotionally manipulative language and a thinly veiled contempt for those who disagree with him. What was especially alarming is that these articles contain the types of errors which I would expect from someone who was completely unfamiliar

with the basic principles of biblical interpretation. It is indeed a frightening thought if the man we are all following is completely mishandling the scriptures.

After reading these articles I am convinced that our fundamental approach to the Scriptures is seriously flawed. We are faced with some important questions then:

- What are the specific teachings that are incorrect?
- Where have we gone wrong as a result of this flawed approach to the Scriptures?

To answer those questions, I will quote from the article directly and then provide my own thoughts after. Anything that appears in this font is a direct quote.

One Man's Influence

One of the most striking if not frightening aspects of these articles is how often the author refers to himself. He constantly mentions how he believes this, or he teaches that or he came to such and such a conclusion. Take a look at just a few examples:

Regarding Speaking where the Bible is Silent:

- **I came to differ** with the Churches of Christ
- **I believe** that we should be silent where the Bible speaks

Regarding the Studies:

- **I developed a series** consisting of nine Bible studies on the "first principles"
- from **my study** of Scripture, **I taught** what was clear in Acts 11:26
- **I purposely** developed this study ...
- **I taught** that to be baptized, you must first make the decision ...
- **I composed** this controversial equation ...

Regarding Discipling Partners:

- **I came up** with "discipleship partners."
- **I felt** this approach was not directive enough.

Regarding world sector leaders:

- **I came to the conviction** that I needed to focus my ministry...

- **I felt** one of the primary requirements ...would be that **I had personally** trained and disciplined them...
- **I selected** the following brothers ...
- **I called them** World Sector Leaders.

Regarding Reconstructions:

- **I called** these efforts "reconstructions"

Regarding the one true church:

- **I do not know** of any other church, group or movement ...
- **I believe** with all my heart that the Boston Movement is God's modern-day movement...

There can be no doubt about this -- the church's core doctrines and practices come from him. As I read through these articles it occurred to me that what we believe as a church has been shaped by what this man believes as an individual. His personal beliefs have determined the basic foundational beliefs of the *entire* church.

- Where did the "one true church" teaching come from?
- Where did the idea of "speak where the Bible is silent" come from?
- Where did the studies come from?
- Where did the doctrine of Saved=Christian=disciple come from?
- Where did the concept of "discipleship partners" come from?
- Where did the concept of the church hierarchy come from?
- Who chose the World Sector Leaders?

It all came from him. There is something very unsettling about this. I began to realize that whether you know it or not, we are all reading the Bible through his eyes. Our beliefs as a church in all these areas come from *his* understanding of the Scriptures.

One of the things that made the biggest impression on me when I first studied the Bible was the concept of not basing your beliefs on the opinion of religious leaders. I remember the brothers warning me of the dangers of simply following one man's opinion. They pointed out to me how many religious groups have gone astray once they began to unquestioningly accept the words of their leaders.

I remember Mike Taliaferro recounting a true story about a pilot who was trying to land his plane in extremely cloudy weather. The clouds were so thick the pilot couldn't see the runway. As a result, he had to completely rely on what he was told from the air traffic control tower. The pilot was told repeatedly by the air traffic controllers to land on runway number 9. He was assured that the runway was open and cleared for his landing.

Finally, the pilot guided his plane underneath the clouds. To his shock and horror, he saw that runway 9 was still under construction! It was strewn about with mounds of dirt, ditches and construction equipment. The pilot had precious little time to maneuver yet he somehow managed to crash land his plane in a field next to the runway. He was the only survivor, everyone else on board was killed.

This story has always stood out in mind as a vivid illustration of the dangers of unquestioningly accepting the words of one man. I began to ask myself some questions:

- Is this situation really what God wants?
- Does He want one man to wield such influence?
- Has he commanded us to appoint someone in this way?
- Did the 1st Century church do this?
- Did Paul, Peter, James or any apostle appoint himself as the "leader of the movement"?

If not, then why would we possibly think that God wants us to do such a thing?

The danger of placing one man in a role of such authority can readily be seen by examining the example of history. Once people began to idolize a particular leader, that leaders words and opinions begin to carry the same weight and influence of the Scriptures themselves. Once this happens, there is no longer any barrier keeping the church from drifting away from sound doctrine.

The questions for us are quite simple then: is there scriptural support for this man's influence over all the churches? Is there Biblical precedent for such a role, particularly in the New Testament? In the next section, I will attempt to answer these questions.

The Example of History

There are several common elements that can be found in the lives of religious leaders who have risen to great prominence. There are also common elements in the way that people react to these figures.

First of all, these men possess certain character traits: they have great charisma, they are able to inspire tremendous loyalty, they inspire people with bold visions of the future, they are good communicators, they are visionaries who refuse to accept the status quo. They are tirelessly devoted to their cause.

Secondly, these men often accomplish some great act early in life that serves to substantiate or justify their claims to leadership. It gives them credibility which in turn inspires others to follow.

Sadly, what often follows is that these leaders take on hero status and they eventually come to be worshipped as heroes or god-like figures. People no longer question their leadership, in fact, to do so is to bring contempt upon yourself because these figures are so deeply loved by their followers. Over time, they drift further and further away from their original goals yet the people don't care because they trust in their leader. This leader's early acts of bravery will be repeatedly mentioned, serving to justify his title or position to the masses.

This leader is ultimately given complete authority to do as he wishes. He is given this authority by his followers. They don't question his teachings, policies or practices. They see him as a truly great figure who is wiser, braver and greater than they are. They abdicate any responsibility to this man.

Ultimately "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Sadly, we see this happen throughout history. The longer this man stays in power, the larger his legend grows and the more drunk with power he becomes. It now becomes heresy to question him or his teachings. Those who disagree are driven away in scorn and revulsion.

Lets look at the history of Christianity. What happened when people bestowed such power and authority on religious leaders?

Augustine (354-430)

Consider Augustine. He is called the Father of Western Theology. Augustine took on such exalted status that he shaped the views and beliefs of thousands upon thousands of Christians. People stopped examining the scriptures objectively and simply accepted the words of one man because he seemed so much smarter and more spiritual than they were.

From Augustine, all sorts of false doctrines were derived. David Bercot describes Augustine's influence in his book *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up*:

"Augustine, fourth century bishop of Hippo, has been one of the most influential Christian teachers of all time in the Western church. His influence on the Western church has rivaled that of the apostles themselves. That's because much of the Western church read the apostles through his eyes. In fact, Augustine is almost universally recognized as *the* father of Western theology.

...In his own lifetime he became *the* theological authority in the West on practically every question of doctrine and morality.

... Yet, again and again, he succumbed to Newton's Law of Theology, overreacting to the errors of various heretics.

... Some of the novel teachings he introduced that were unknown to the early church were:

- war can be holy
- some of the practices and teachings of the apostles no longer apply to Christians because the apostles lived in a different age
- unbaptized infants are eternally damned as a result of Adam's fall,
- man is totally depraved."

Years later, during the Reformation, many reformers such as Martin Luther simply accepted Augustine's teachings without question and built other incorrect ideas on top of them. People were not "just going by the Bible", they were actually going by Augustine's understanding of the Bible. There is a huge difference! Following one man's opinions led

to thousands upon thousands of people being taught all kinds of falsehoods.

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

There are so many good things that can be said of Martin Luther. His courage to stand alone in the face of fierce opposition from the religious powers of his day is truly inspiring. His teaching regarding the importance of faith in the lives of Christians was like a beacon of light in a dark, legalistic time. His tireless work in translating the Bible into German made the Scriptures available to the masses.

As a result of these and other characteristics, Luther became one of the most influential religious leaders of his time. He was considered by many to be the leader of the fight against the corruption of the Catholic Church. In time, he had thousands of loyal, devoted followers.

Yet Luther had a dark side which was never more visible than in his reaction to an uprising of German peasants. Despite the fact that many of these same peasants saw him as one of their own and were in acting out of their understanding of *his* writings, he nonetheless urged the German nobility to crush their rebellion. In a tract entitled “Against the robbing and murdering Peasants” he wrote:

“strange times, these, when a prince can win heaven with bloodshed, better than other men with prayer! ... Stab, smite, slay whomever you can!”

Luther’s advice was followed by the nobility in mercilessly bloody fashion. Thousands of peasants were killed as a result. Clearly, Luther was not a man to be followed, yet his stature had grown to such a degree that people genuinely believed that he understood the will of God better than anyone else. Years later he tried to defend his actions by saying that God himself had led him to write those things.

Who Speaks for God?

Very often, religious leaders will claim that their authority comes directly from God and that to question them is to question Almighty God Himself. This type of leader must be considered carefully. Is their authority genuine or are they ruling by fear and intimidation? These men are much harder to resist because their followers are not motivated by love as

much as by fear. They live in complete fear of questioning this man because they believe that to do so is to oppose God. This type of man can be especially dangerous because the power he wields is far reaching and virtually without limit. If he has the character of leadership, the credibility of past victories *and* a divine calling, he is a potent leader indeed.

The questions then, are these: how can we tell if someone is truly a leader sent from God? What is the role of the Christian in identifying the authenticity of spiritual leaders? More specifically for us, what is the Biblical justification for the role of "leader of the movement?" These Scriptures come to mind:

1Jn.4:1

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but *test the spirits to see whether they are from God*, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Rev 2:2

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that *you have tested those who claim to be apostles* but are not, and have found them false.

Jer 23:30-39

"Therefore," declares the LORD, "I am against the prophets who steal from one another words supposedly from me."³¹ Yes," declares the LORD, "I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, 'The LORD declares.'³² Indeed, I am against those who prophesy false dreams," declares the LORD. "They tell them and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them. They do not benefit these people in the least," declares the LORD.

Speak Where the Bible Speaks

"Along with this, **I came to differ** with the Churches of Christ whose creed is "to speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent." This creed dictated that one must have specific authorization by command, example or necessary inference from the Bible to do anything. It developed a legalistic, pharisaic mind set that sowed the seed for much dissension and division producing the factions of the Churches of Christ.

For example, the whole mandate to only "call Bible things by Bible names" is contradictory because the word "Bible" is not even in the Bible! From the Scriptures **I came to believe** the opposite. **I believe** that we should be silent where the Bible speaks and speak where the Bible is silent. In other words, a Christian should simply obey where the Bible speaks and only speak (have opinions) where the Bible is silent.

In building a life, a church or a "system" for a movement, we are "free" to do anything the Scriptures do not specifically, by command, by example or by necessary inference prohibit (Colossians 2:6-23). The truth seeker will always strive to be faithful to the direction and the spirit of the Scriptures."

The author says that "In building a life, a church or a 'system' for a movement, we are free to do anything the Scriptures do not specifically, by command, by example or by necessary inference prohibit." In principle, I agree with this point. I agree that God gives us as believers certain latitude and freedom in figuring out how to carry out his commands. To claim that you can't do anything that isn't done by example in the Scriptures is to turn the New Testament into a rigid rulebook.

Unfortunately, the actual implementation of this idea is equally wrong. What has actually ended up happening however, is that this man has bound his *own opinions* on the entire church. Essentially, when he has formed an opinion about something, that opinion has become the official doctrine and practice of the ICC. His opinions have come to carry the same weight as Scripture itself. Sadly, many people don't even know where the Scriptures end and his opinions begin. He mentions Col 2:6-23 as a reference text. I am completely at a loss as to how he thinks these verses support his point.

Let's look at the passage in its entirety:

Col 2:6-3:1

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him,⁷ rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of

this world rather than on Christ.

⁹ For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰ and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹ In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

¹³ When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. ¹⁸ Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. ¹⁹ He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

²⁰ Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? ²² These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. ²³ Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

How does this passage in any way support the idea that leaders can bind their own opinion on Christians in areas where the Bible is silent? If anything, this passage prohibits us from doing the very thing the author has done.

Paul tells the Colossians: “just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught”

He’s telling them to continue to live in Jesus *as they were taught*. He’s encouraging them to grow in their faith and in what they had already learned. In verse 8 he tells them to beware of “philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world.” Then in verse 10 he tells them that they “have been given fullness in Christ.” The New American Standard translates verse 10 like this:

Col 2:10

and in Him you have been *made complete*, and He is the head over all rule and authority;

Paul says that through Jesus the Christian has been made *complete*, therefore we don’t need any kind of human tradition or worldly principles to help us as we serve God. We don’t need to invent a system and impose it on Christians. We don’t need to look to the world for answers. Let’s put it together then. Paraphrased, Paul is telling them “continue in what you have learned because in Christ you lack nothing. You are complete. You don’t need to add any human ideas to your relationship with God. He has already given us everything we need.”

Paul reinforces his point later on in verse 20 when he tells them:

“Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? ²² These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings.”

Paul is telling them that the human commands and teachings (opinions) that some were putting forth were in fact useless. A Christian is to live in Christ and in Christ’s teachings and he is to avoid that which comes from the world.

Again, if anything, this passage demonstrates the sufficiency of what has been given to us in the Scriptures and makes it clear that we don't need to add any human commands and teachings to grow in our faith. I cannot possibly see how you can use this passage to teach that leaders can add their opinions to the Scriptures and then bind them on the church.

Furthermore, what ultimately ends up happening however is that the author assumes the responsibility of deciding how we go about building our church or our "system" Its not so much that *we* are free to decide how to do these things but rather that *he* is free to decide how we should do them. He then goes on to bind his own opinions on these issues on every member of every congregation.

The other problem with this whole line of thinking is that inevitably you end up speaking not just where the Bible is silent but where the Bible speaks as well. Just take a look back through history and take a look at what happened when church leaders decided to speak where the Bible is silent.

For example, the author writes that "a Christian should simply obey where the Bible speaks." That seems to make good sense. Yet consider this verse:

2 Cor 9:7

Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

If we should simply obey where the Bible speaks, than why do insist on telling people how much money to give when it comes to special contribution? This is a great example of what happens when you decide to make up a humanistic "system" to advance spiritual goals. You end up ignoring clear biblical commands and then you rationalize your actions.

Speaking where the Bible is silent is exactly what has gotten the church in trouble through the ages. What happens when you speak where the Bible is silent is that the opinions of church leaders take on the same weight as the Scriptures themselves. In time, if you disagree with a leaders opinion or understanding, you will be thought to be attacking the Scriptures themselves. Eventually, people can't tell where the Scriptures end and their leaders opinions begin because they seem to have merged together.

For example, we believe that the phrase “bear much fruit” in John 15 means “make many disciples.” Virtually everyone believes that. Yet in talking to different Christians I have not found anyone who has actually studied this topic on their own and reached this conclusion. Why do they believe this then? Because this one particular leader believes it.

We teach that the tithing is required for Christians. Once again, you will find very few people who have ever studied the topic from the Old Testament through to the New Testament. Why do they believe it then? Because this one particular leader believes it.

Once you begin speaking where the Bible is silent you invariably end up adding all kinds of things to the Scripture that God never intended. Leaders begin to add things to the scriptures and then they add to that which they’ve already added. Over the course of time you end up building doctrinal castles in the air which have no foundation in the Scriptures.

The Studies

“Early on **I developed a series** consisting of nine Bible studies on the “first principles” (Hebrews 6:13). The members of the church were called to memorize these studies and then teach others to become Christians. The most impacting was called “Discipleship” where, **from my study of Scripture, I taught** what was clear in Acts 11:26: **SAVED = CHRISTIAN = DISCIPLE**, simply meaning that you cannot be saved and you cannot be a true Christian without being a disciple also.

I purposely developed this study to draw a sharp biblical distinction between the Lexington (later renamed Boston) Church of Christ and all other groups. **I taught** that to be baptized, you must first make the decision to be a disciple and then be baptized. **I saw** that people in and outside of our fellowship had been baptized without this understanding and then, in time, developed a disciple's commitment to make Jesus Lord of their entire life.”

... A few months later, the doctrine from God's Word in Acts 11:26, “Saved = Christian = Disciple,” was crystallized and thus restored.. **I composed this controversial equation** to convict and help individuals with a denominational church background to see that they were not true Christians.”

What are the studies we use? They are the authors own understanding of the Scriptures.

We can change the order in which we do them. We can add some. We can even change them around slightly. But we must do them. No one is baptized in our churches without first having done these studies. Is this a bad thing? Not necessarily. It becomes a bad thing however when these studies, created and compiled by one man, become the only means by which we present the Word of God to people.

It is inconceivable for us to just baptize someone after simply preaching the Gospel to them the way they did in the book of Acts. Everyone is expected to do these studies. And those who wish to get baptized in our church must agree with the conclusions we reach in these studies.

Secondly, he writes: “**I purposely developed this study** to draw a sharp biblical distinction between the Lexington (later renamed Boston) Church of Christ and all other groups.”

The act of drawing a sharp distinction between you and all other groups based on your supposed deeper understanding of scripture and your higher level of commitment is both judgmental and spiritually arrogant. When you draw a line in the sand and then say “anyone who doesn’t agree with Scriptures the way I do is not a Christian,” you are placing yourself in a position of judgment that belongs to God alone. I will address this question in more detail later on in this study.

Discipling Partners

“...in the Crossroads movement, one another Christianity was expressed in a buddy system called “prayer partners,” where each person chose their own “buddy.” With so many new Christians in the Boston church, **I felt this approach was not directive enough.** Building upon this concept, **I came up with “discipleship partners.”** In these relationships, the evangelists, elders and women's counselors, after discussion and prayer, arranged for an older, stronger Christian to give direction to each of the younger, weaker ones . They were to meet weekly, but have daily contact”

Discipling partners, according to the author, are something he came up with based on the old “prayer partner” system at Crossroads. He felt however that the Crossroads approach

wasn't "directive" enough. I think what he means by this is that the idea of two people teaching each other or encouraging each other as peers/equals is not acceptable.

He felt that these relationships need to be ordered such that one person is "over" the other person, or at least that one is the "teacher" while the other is the "student." In other words, there needs to be a clear line of *authority* in these relationships. Furthermore, the Christians are not to choose these relationships themselves but instead, they are to be "arranged" by the leaders. To summarize his view: "one another Christianity" is to be implemented in *one-over-one* (as opposed to *one-on-one*) relationships that are arranged by the leaders.

Some questions must be asked however: Where do you see this specific example in the scriptures? What I mean is, where do you see leaders assigning or arranging specific relationships? Where are we commanded to meet weekly with these people? Where does this thinking come from?

Let's look at some passages that describe relationships. In Ephesians 5:21-6:9 Paul discusses the attitudes and actions that should be present in each of the following relationships:

1. Husband and Wives
2. Parents and Children
3. Masters and Slaves

This passage begins with a statement that teaches us the attitude every Christian must have regardless of his position, role or station in life:

Eph 5:21

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Paul doesn't say: "submit to your discipler because God blesses humility." He doesn't mention anything that could even remotely be considered "discipleship partner relationships." He simply says "submit to *one another*." Why do we find fault with this? Why do we feel that "one another", peer relationships are inadequate and must be improved by adding the element of authority into them?

In Col 3:18-25 Paul goes over the same list of relationships (husbands/wives, parents/children, master/slaves). Yet consider how he begins his lesson:

Col 3:16

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly *as you teach and admonish one another* with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

Let's put the two passages together. Paul told the Ephesians to "submit to one another." He tells the Colossians to "teach and admonish one another." There is no hint, suggestion or indication of any kind that he expected the Christians to be arranged in ordered, one-over-one relationships. If Paul wanted us to be assigning discipling partners does it not stand to reason that He would give us some guidelines as to how this relationship should be structured?

Consider what he told the Romans:

Rom 15:14

I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to *instruct one another*.

Think about this for a moment. Paul didn't command the Romans to set up one-over-one discipling relationships because the "peer" approach wasn't directive enough. He said the exact opposite! He said that he was *convinced* that they were able to instruct one another. He fully expected teaching to be mutual. What we're saying is "you're *not* competent to instruct one another. You're competent to teach your disciple but he's not competent to teach you. Oh, you may learn things from him but it's not a relationship among peers. The discipler is the authority figure."

Let's take a look at other verses dealing with this issue. First, let's take a look at the relationships Peter teaches us about in 1 Peter 2:13-3:8. Just like Paul did, Peter describes the relationships between husbands/wives and master/slaves. He discusses other relationships also:

1 Peter 2:13-14

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority,¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

This passage is dealing with our submission to secular, governmental figures. It is not talking about discipling relationships or even church leaders.

At the end of this passage however, he concludes with this thought:

⁸ Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.

Here again, we see that Peter expected a mutual submission among Christians. There is nothing in this passage teaching us to submit to “disciplers.” Later on in the letter, Peter writes:

1 Peter 5:5-7

Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, *clothe yourselves with humility toward one another*, because,

"God opposes the proud
but gives grace to the humble."

⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

We learn in this passage that young men are to be submissive to those who are older but ultimately we are to be humble towards *one another* and to God. This passage does not teach us to “submit to your discipler because God will bless your humility.” What we do is teach a one way submission: “submit to your discipler.” We teach half the equation. We teach “be humble to your discipler because God will bless you.” Is that what this passage teaches or are we reading things into it that aren’t there?

The other relationship that hasn't been discussed is the relationship of leaders to Christians. Hebrews 13:17 addresses this very issue. By leaders, however, this scripture is referring to elders, deacons, evangelists or teachers. You can't use this passage to say that you must submit to your discipler because the term "discipling partner" is not defined in the scriptures nor is it even mentioned.

The problem is that we have taken general, non-specific commands (such as "instruct one another" and "teach others to obey") and created a specific, detailed method which *must* be followed. This system has now come to have the same weight as scripture.

I think it is revealing that when he set up this system he made sure that people would *not* be able to make their own decision as to who their spiritual mentor would be. As he says, in the Crossroads church members *chose their own prayer partner*. In his church this freedom was taken away. From now on, the leaders would make that decision. Why would he change that? Why did he find fault with people choosing their own partner?

We often use this verse to justify the leaders arranging discipling partners:

2 Tim 2:1-2

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. ² And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.

First of all, the things that Paul said in this situation were said in the presence of many witnesses. In this particular situation, he didn't teach them to Timothy one on one. Then Paul tells him to entrust these teachings to reliable men who can teach others. Does this mean that Paul wanted Timothy to set up a chain of "teaching relationships" where one guy teaches the next guy who teaches the next guy until you get to the end of the chain?

I don't believe that is what this passage teaches at all. I believe that this passage is referring to the choosing of elders who can in turn teach the congregation. Consider these passages in 1st Timothy:

1 Tim 3:1-3

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband

of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, *able to teach ...*

1 Tim 5:17

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially *those whose work is preaching and teaching.*

Consider also what Paul told Titus:

Titus 1:6-9

An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. ⁷ Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless-not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. ⁸ Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. ⁹ He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, *so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine* and refute those who oppose it.

The only people that Paul refers to as teachers (or who should be teaching), are himself, Timothy, Titus, the elders and the older women who should teach the younger women. Paul also mentions the role of “teacher” in 1 Cor 12:28 and Eph 4: 11 but this role is never really described or explained. One thing is certain however, Paul doesn’t give Timothy or Titus any direction on how “discipling” relationships should be structured.

I think a very important point needs to be made regarding elders. The reason Paul goes into such detail as to the qualifications of elders demonstrates the importance of their role. I believe that “discipling” (as in “teaching to obey”) must begin first and foremost with scripturally qualified elders. I believe that the primary source of teaching should then be from elders and not from an invented, man-made position of “discipler.”

I’m not saying we shouldn’t want to get disciplined or have close relationships, I’m saying it is simply unscriptural to bind this system on people and claim the authority of God in doing so. And I’m also saying that we should allow people the freedom to be led by the Spirit and make their own decisions regarding their spiritual mentors.

The concept of assigned discipling partners is so ingrained in our church that it is never questioned. We say that your discipler has been put in your life by God. Where does it say that in the Bible? Where does it say that God puts one specific person in your life to be your discipler? Where does it say that you need to get together with this person once a week for at least two hours?

In the DPI book *The Proudful Souls Guide to Humility* there is a chapter called “Humility in Discipling.” One of the points of the chapter is “be eager to be submissive.” The author writes:

“Yes we must learn to think for ourselves if we have not already done so. No, we must not blindly obey or submit to anyone. However, in the context of spiritual relationships in which no compromise of God’s word is involved, we must trust that God will work through our submission. Even if the direction we are given is not the very best, God will bless our humble response to it.

If someone who is trying to help us asks us to read a certain book, study a certain passage, focus on a certain area of our lives or even take a certain challenge, humility means we will be eager to submit. Only when we are being asked to do something unwise or that is not Biblical, should we hesitate. In such cases we should, with humility, express our concerns and talk the issue through to resolution. Just going out and doing something different is not the answer”

Yet the scriptures he uses to support his points (Eph 5:21, James 3:17, 1 Peter 2:18-3:8, 5:5-6) don’t say anything at all about disciplers. The points he makes are nowhere to be found in the Scriptures he cites. As we have already seen, these verses describe specific relationships (none of which are discipling partners) and they are summarized by the command to “submit to one another.” All this teaching about the specific ways that you ought to submit to your discipler (read a certain book, take a certain challenge, etc.) are purely invented and man-made. He is reading into the Scriptures ideas that are simply not there.

Think about this for a moment. The Bible says absolutely *nothing at all* about the leaders arranging and ordering discipling partners. Nothing. The writer of the RtR article even admits that he came up with the idea himself. So we have no direction from God at all about this role or position. Yet we are taught that your discipler has been placed in your life by God Himself because God works through people. We teach that he/she ought to be the primary spiritual influence in your life. We teach that you need to imitate this person and submit to them in virtually every matter.

The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Lives of Christians

As a result of this teaching, your discipler becomes the main vehicle through which you seek to grow in your relationship with God. I agree that God works through people, I have no problem with that. He doesn't however, work *only* through people. He works *primarily* through His Spirit which he has given us. We completely downplay the role of the Holy Spirit in peoples lives and we over emphasize the role of the "discipler."

One of the greatest promises Jesus made to his disciples was the promise to send the Holy Spirit as a "counselor" or "comforter" and to stay with us forever.

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.

When Paul writes about the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5, he's describing the qualities and character changes that God works in us, not through a human discipler, but through the presence of His Spirit in you. The letter to the Ephesians illustrates how Paul sees the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives as an incredible source of *power*:

Eph 1:17-20

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, *may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.*¹⁸ I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,¹⁹ and *his incomparably great power for us who believe.* That power is like the working of his mighty

strength,²⁰ which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms...

How does Paul say we may know God better? By the Spirit! God reveals his wisdom to us through His Spirit. We seek wisdom primarily from human leaders. Consider that we tell people to get human advice much more often than we direct them to seek the counsel of God through His Spirit. Did Jesus not call the Spirit the “Counselor?”

I’m not saying we shouldn’t get advice. I’m saying that there is a real problem when we teach the pre-eminence of your discipled advice over the voice of the Spirit. When someone is preparing to make a major life decision, the first thing they will usually be told is: “make sure you get a lot of advice.” How often do you hear people say “make sure you seek the wisdom of God through His Spirit.”

Yes, the Proverbs are full of passages about advice. However, we need to view the Proverbs in their correct context. They were written to a people who did not have the power of God inside them as we do. Paul described the concept of “Christ in you” (or the Holy Spirit living inside Christians) as a “mystery that had been kept hidden for ages and generations.” This mystery was not known to King Solomon and the other writers of Proverbs.

Col 1:24-27

I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness-²⁶ the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.²⁷ To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Yes, we need to seek advice. It is foolish not to seek the counsel of those who are wiser and older than we are. However, in the process of seeking God’s will for our lives these people are in a supportive role, not the primary role. That belongs to God’s Spirit.

Eph 3:14-19

For this reason I kneel before the Father,¹⁵ from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches *he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,*

¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have *power*, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

How are we strengthened? Through the Spirit!

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, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Paul writes that the Spirit inside us is *power*. It is not the second fiddle to your disciplers opinion or human leaders advice. Furthermore, Paul says that this Spirit is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine! Think about that for a moment. That means that God's Spirit can answer our prayers, it can help us make godly decisions, it can help us discern what is best. It can do all the things that we insist must come mostly from "getting advice" and from "discipling."

We don't see the blatant inconsistency in our teaching. On the one hand we freely acknowledge these verses and the power of the Spirit. On the other hand, we deny its power when we place the main responsibility for growing in Christ on a human discipler.

It's just my opinion, but I think that deep down, we are afraid of letting people follow God as the Spirit leads them. I think we're afraid the numbers will go down. We're afraid that chaos will result. We're afraid that people will just go out and sin like crazy. We're afraid that God cannot work directly in people's lives without some type of man-made mechanism to maintain control. Why else would leaders not allow people to choose their own spiritual mentor or discipler? Why else would he feel that this is a decision only the leaders should make?

Interestingly enough, the author writes that he decided that the leaders should arrange disciplers for people because of how many new Christians there were in Boston. He obviously felt that new Christians lacked the spiritual maturity to make such an

important decision. Today, however, you can be a Christian for 30 years and you're still not considered spiritual enough to make your own decision as to who discipled you. Ironically, the leader who chooses your discipler may himself be a new Christian!

So now you have a situation where the guy who's been a Christian for decades (but isn't a leader) is not spiritually equipped to make this decision for himself, but the guy who's been a Christian for two years (but is in the full time ministry) is equipped. This entire situation makes no sense. Does God's Spirit only work through the leaders?

This whole matter of discipling illustrates what happens when one man is venerated above all others: what was originally an idea of one individual leader is now taught as a direct command of God. The author wrote: "I came up with "discipleship partners." Now we teach that discipling is "God's Plan."

He also wrote that instead of people choosing their own partners, "the evangelists, elders and women's counselors, after discussion and prayer" were to decide what the discipling arrangements should be. What is taught now is that "your discipler has been put in your life by God."

Do you see what's happened? This man's opinion has transformed itself into Scriptural truth. According to us, if you disagree with discipling, you're not disagreeing with the leaders. You're disagreeing with God because after all, we all know that discipling is God's Plan.

Authority

Regarding his teaching on authority, the author writes:

"I was wrong on some of my initial thoughts about biblical authority. **I had felt** that church leaders could call people to obey and follow them in all areas of opinion. This was incorrect. I feel very badly for people who were hurt by this wrong stance."

This episode is exactly the reason why there should not be one man at the top of the church who decides doctrine – because when the one man is wrong, the *whole church* is wrong

and led astray. This leader once taught about authority incorrectly. I remember this time very well. I personally witnessed many situations where leaders acted in an authoritarian, legalistic manner precisely because they believed that they had authority to do so. I remember listening to one of this man's sermons where he said "in areas of opinion, you obey."

His "initial thoughts" on authority became the official teaching of the entire movement. No one really questioned it – at least not publicly. Other leaders just went along with this man's opinion. Perhaps they did not feel the freedom to disagree (for fear of somehow being disunified or divisive). In any event, it was only after the author changed his mind that the church's official position changed.

Growth as the Evidence of God's Grace

"Worldwide, God's family is growing in unprecedented ways, evidencing the grace of God (Acts 11:23)"

This seemingly innocent statement actually reveals our understanding that numerical growth is the evidence of God's grace. I have heard this concept taught in a few ways - in the positive form as in "we're growing, that means we're receiving the grace of God"; and also in a negative form as in "if you're not growing, you're not under grace."

We point to our phenomenal growth as the most important piece of evidence that proves that we are truly God's movement. It really is amazing to see how big we've grown in such a short time. But the question must still be asked: does numerical growth really prove God's blessing is on us?

Here's the passage in question:

Acts 11:19-24

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.

²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹

The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned

to the Lord.

²² News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

In verse 21 the scripture mentions “a great number of people believed.” In verse 23 it says that Barnabas saw the “evidence of the grace of God.” What we teach is that the evidence of God’s grace is referring specifically to the fact that a great number believed. In other words, the evidence of God’s grace was their large numerical growth. Not just the fact that they grew, but that they grew by a “great number.”

If you look at verse 23 in the Greek, you’ll see that the word “evidence” does not appear in the text. Here’s how it looks literally translated:

ὃς	παραγενόμενος	καὶ	ἰδὼν	τὴν	χάριν	τοῦ [τῆν]
Who,	when he came,	and	had seen	the	grace	
θεοῦ	ἐχάρη	καὶ	παρεκάλει		πάντας	
of God,	was glad,	and	exhorted	them	all,	

Let’s look at other Bible translations to see what we can learn about this passage:

Acts 11:23 Today’s English Version

When he arrived and saw how God had blessed the people, he was glad and urged them all to be faithful and true to the Lord with all their hearts.

Acts 11:23 The Living Bible

When he arrived and saw the wonderful things God was doing, he was filled with excitement and joy, and encouraged the believers to stay close to the Lord, whatever the cost.

Acts 11:23 New American Standard

Then when he had come and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord;

As always, we must carefully examine the context. In Acts chapter 10 we see the household of Cornelius become Christians. This was the very first time that Gentiles were included in the family of God. This was nothing less than an astonishing change.

Acts 10:45

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were *astonished* that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.

The reason these circumcised believers were astonished is that for hundreds of years the Jews had prided themselves on being God's only chosen people. Since salvation was only available to them they gloried in their favored status and looked down on the Gentiles.

Consider this excerpt from the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia:

“...as we approach the Christian era the attitude of the Jews toward the Gentiles changes, until we find, in New Testament times, the most extreme aversion, scorn and hatred. They were regarded as unclean, with whom it was unlawful to have any friendly intercourse. They were the enemies of God and His people, to whom the knowledge of God was denied unless they became proselytes, and even then they could not, as in ancient times, be admitted to full fellowship.

... If we inquire what the reason of this change was we shall find it in the conditions of the exiled Jews, who suffered the bitterest treatment at the hands of their gentile captors and who, after their return and establishment in Judea, were in constant conflict with neighboring tribes and especially with the Greek rulers of Syria. The fierce persecution of Antiochus IV, who attempted to blot out their religion and Hellenize the Jews, and the desperate struggle for independence, created in them a burning patriotism and zeal for their faith which culminated in the rigid exclusiveness we see in later times.”

So we see that the Jewish attitude towards the Gentiles was characterized by extreme scorn and hatred. Yet, right there in Acts 10 they see the saving grace of Jesus being poured on non-Jews. Moving to chapter 11, we see the believers scattered by persecution. Some preached the message only to Jews. Other believers however, went to Antioch and decided to preach the gospel to non-Jews, in this case to the Greeks:

Acts 11:19-20

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.

²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus

We don't know who these men were. We don't know if they were apostles or leaders of any kind. All we know is that they told the Greeks the good news about Jesus and because God was with them, a great number of these Greeks believed. Verse 21 says:

²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

The church in Jerusalem hears about this and sends Barnabas to Antioch to encourage them. As we have seen, the context of Acts 10 and 11 is that the good news of Jesus was now being preached to non-Jews and God was accepting them as His children. For the first time, God was not making a distinction between Jew and Gentile but was accepting them equally. This was nothing short of revolutionary for those who had been raised as Jews. Picking the story up again we see Barnabas, who was a Jew (Acts 4:36), going down to Antioch. The Bible says he saw the grace of God when he arrived. Here's the question: exactly what is this referring to?

The Scriptures do not give us an exact answer to this question. We really don't know exactly what this refers to. However, I do not believe that this is referring specifically to their numerical growth. I think that is an extremely shallow understanding of this passage.

What is grace, after all? It is the merciful kindness by which God accepts us his children and forgives us of our sins. It is also the continuing kindness of God working in our lives and transforming our hearts.

I believe that the "evidence of God's grace" that Barnabas saw was the changed lives of these new believers in Antioch. It was the fact that *Gentiles* were turning to God and accepting the Gospel. Consider this verse later on in Acts which refers to the fact that it is by grace that we believe:

Acts 18:27

When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by **grace** had believed.

Ultimately, growth by itself doesn't really prove anything – it certainly doesn't prove that you're under God's grace. If it was the *great number* of new believers that was the evidence of God's grace than by implication, a small number of new believers (like Cornelius and his family) would not be evidence of God's grace.

Furthermore, this passage is not in any way attempting to teach a concrete doctrine that you're only "under grace" if you're experiencing growth in large numbers and that God will refuse his grace if such growth isn't occurring. That is saying that your access to God's grace is dependent on your performance – if you're not converting "great numbers" you're not under grace and therefore lost. That is a works based salvation! We cannot earn God's grace by working hard and converting great numbers of people.

Romans 11:5-6

So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.⁶ And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

Consider this passage:

Acts 4:33

With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much **grace** was upon them all.

Does this passage teach that if you're not testifying to the resurrection with great power, you're not under grace? Not at all, it simply tells us that God poured out his favor on the believers. I believe that is exactly what Acts 11:23 is telling us. God was with those believers who were scattered, and He caused the Greeks to accept the Gospel, thus, His grace was upon them. Not because they earned it but because He loved them. I don't believe you can read any more into Acts 11:23 than that.

Looking at this issue from another perspective, David Bercot makes a great point about the

growth of the early church in his book, *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up:*

“Does growth equal God’s Favor? Once the church opened itself to change, how could it know whether God approved the changes? Many thought the answer was easy. To them, growth indicated God’s approval. Christianity had grown rapidly in the first three centuries, but after the conversion of Constantine the church *mushroomed*. At the time of Edict of Milan (313 A.D.), probably a tenth of the Roman Empire had converted to Christianity. But that had taken nearly three hundred years. In less than a hundred years after the Edict of Milan, nearly all of the other 90 percent had been “converted” Many in the church believed that this rapid growth was a sure sign of God’s approval. But it wasn’t”

Consider the numbers of some other groups:

The Church of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) was officially organized in 1830 with six members. According to their figures for 1999 their membership is 10,752,986.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses were officially begun in 1874 by Charles Taze Russel. Today they have 5,912,492 members in 89,985 different congregations. In 1999 they added 323,439 new members.

The Church of Scientology began with five “churches” in 1950. Today they have over 1,000 churches, missions or organizations all over the world. Their most recent membership was published in 1992 and listed them as having over seven million members worldwide.

The Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon was started in 1954. Today it has an estimated 250,000 members worldwide.

If numerical growth is the evidence of God’s grace than these groups are certainly enjoying God’s favor. The Mormons started with one man, Joseph Smith. From this one man they now have over 10 million members! That is pretty phenomenal growth.

We would argue however that their doctrine is incorrect, therefore their growth cannot a sign of God’s blessing. Their growth must simply be the result of human effort. So then we are forced to qualify our statement that growth is evidence of God’s grace. Growth is not

the evidence of anything. As the numbers above show, incorrect doctrine can grow just as rapidly as correct doctrine.

Conclusion

The incredible growth we have seen in our churches is both inspiring and encouraging. Thousands of our brothers and sisters all over the world have sacrificed, prayed and dedicated their lives fully to the cause and been willing to go to far away and dangerous places. Here in the US, our churches continue to grow as well. We can truly rejoice about this. However, our growth doesn't "prove" anything in and of itself. It does not establish us as "God's Modern Day Movement."

Remember, only God knows those who are His. It is not our job to seek external means to verify our exclusive status as the only expression of Christianity in our time. To take confidence in our growth rate is not wise. We must remember Jesus' words:

Luke 17:20-21

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation,²¹ nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."

Reconstructions and Remnant Theology

In the late 1980's a series of lessons outlining the authors view of "remnant theology" created quite a stir amongst our churches. The author discusses this in RtR:

"I called these efforts "reconstructions" after the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem in the book of Nehemiah.

I saw all the way through the Bible that God, from time to time, took the few who were faithful and separated them from the unfaithful to have a purified people devoted to him... Thus, we purposefully set about to glean the remnant into what now was clearly a new, modern day movement of God."

Notice that the author writes "God ... took the few who were faithful and separated them from the unfaithful."

God can do this because:

- (1) he is sovereign and
- (2) he alone knows who is truly faithful.

The author later writes that “we purposefully set about to glean the remnant.” The problem with this statement is that we simply do not have the authority to “glean the remnant” nor has God commanded us to do such a thing.

It was always God who issued the divine commands to separate. We have been given no such divine message. Secondly, we can't possibly know who is truly faithful to God.

2 Tim 2:18-19

Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his,"

In saying that we alone are faithful and all other groups aren't, we are exalting ourselves before both God and men. Only God knows who his children are. Only God can see inside our hearts.

In the parable of the weeds and the dragnet, it is the angels who do the separating of the good vs. the bad, and this is done at the end of the age.

Matt 13:37-41

He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. ⁴⁰ "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil.

Matt 13:47-50

"Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸ When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the

bad away.

⁴⁹ This is how it will be at the end of the age. The **angels** will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Here are other verses in the New Testament that mention the remnant:

Acts 15:12-19

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. ¹⁵The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶"After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, ¹⁷ that the **remnant** of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' ¹⁸that have been known for ages.

¹⁹"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

Rom 9:27-32

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel:

"Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the **remnant** will be saved.

²⁸For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality."

²⁹It is just as Isaiah said previously:

"Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah."

³⁰What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. ³²Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the "stumbling stone."

Rom 11:1-6

I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. ²God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah-how he appealed to God against Israel: ³"Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"? ⁴And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." ⁵So too, at the present time there is a **remnant** chosen by grace. ⁶And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

Each of these verses in the New Testament mention the remnant as already having been chosen. The remnant consists of the Gentiles who have accepted the Gospel through faith and have therefore been accepted by God through grace. God has already chosen the remnant and the criteria for "membership" is faith and grace.

Once again you have an example of us speaking where the Bible already speaks.

4. EXAMINATION OF THE ROLE OF LEADER OF THE MOVEMENT

We justify the position of leader of the movement in three ways. One, we say that God has always worked through one man to lead his people. We're referring to the prophets, patriarchs, judges, kings and of course, Moses and Joshua.

Secondly, we say; "Think about it: every movement has a leader. Every corporation, every sports team, every organization. Even in the family the leader is the father. The bottom line is that someone has to lead."

Thirdly, we point to the example of men in history such as Calvin, Zwingli, Luther and others. We say that God has always used one man to start movements leading men back to Him. It just happens to be that in this generation it is this man whom God has chosen.

These all seem to be a perfectly good explanations. Yet consider carefully the reasoning behind our claim that our leader has been chosen by God. We go back to the Old Testament and see one man leading Israel and we feel justified; then we skip over the New Testament and early church history and go straight to the Reformation era where we once again we see movements led by one man (Luther, Calvin, Wesley, etc.) Then we use the "every movement has a leader" line of reasoning to support our point even more.

I don't know exactly when, but somewhere in our growth as a church this man's role stopped being spiritually healthy and became worldly hero worship. A definition is in order:

hero worship

1. a profound reverence for great people or their memory.
2. extravagant or excessive admiration for a personal hero.

It is almost frightening the way he is spoken of in our fellowship. An aura has developed around him that is spiritually dangerous. It is as if no one dares question this man. What is especially disturbing is the virtual "promotional campaign" waged on his behalf with every KNN. Its as if every issue of KNN revolves around him. I recall one issue where he was

mentioned constantly and virtually every teaching or decision was somehow traced back to him. He was shown on screen 11 times in a 20 minute video. Furthermore, every single KNN mentions that it was he who "started the movement."

I have to ask: why the need to constantly praise one individual and give him "credit" for starting the movement? Why the need to create this legend around him? More importantly, how can he allow himself to be canonized in this way?

As we said, a common justification is this: God has always worked through one man to lead his people. We're referring to the prophets, patriarchs, judges, kings and of course, Moses and Joshua. In our generation, it just happens to be him.

When we make this statement, we're making the implicit assumption that God deals with humanity the same way now as he did during the time of the Old Testament. Our reasoning is that since God worked through one man in the old days, it's logical to assume that he would do so now in order to restore the New Testament church. Let's take a look at the Scriptures and examine how leadership was chosen and in what capacity they served.

Old Testament Leaders

First of all, the men who led in the Old Testament were personally chosen by God. They did not appoint themselves to their roles. God spoke to them directly by dreams, in visions, through angels or in direct communication. No one today can claim such a calling. More importantly, God no longer speaks to us in the way he spoke to the Israelites. Consider this verse in Hebrews:

Heb 1:1-2

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.

In the past God worked through his chosen men - the patriarchs, prophets and others; in these last days (under the New Covenant) God speaks to us through Jesus. As a result, there is no longer a need for one man to be chosen to lead and instruct God's people. That is done through Jesus, the head of the Church, and through God's Spirit who has been

given to us as counselor. All of this corresponds exactly with Paul's statements about leadership in 1st Corinthians - we are nothing but messengers; those who sow and water.

Jesus told us that *all* authority is his. He made it clear to the Apostles that there would be no "positions of leadership" to assume (Mark 10:35-45). Leadership is now embodied in servanthood.

As we stated earlier, one of the most important principles of understanding the Bible correctly is the principle of dispensations - the idea that God deals with man differently under the dispensation of the New Covenant than he did under the Old Covenant. As a result we must be very careful not to draw incorrect conclusions from Old Testament examples.

New Testament Leaders

There was no leader of the movement in the New Testament church. The Christians in the first century did not appoint anyone to lead the movement. Nor did any apostle assert himself as the "lead apostle" and therefore leader of the movement. Peter could have -after all, he had been given the keys to the Kingdom. James could have - after all, he was Jesus' brother. Paul could have - after all, Jesus personally chose him to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

If anyone had the qualifications to be "leader of the movement" it was these men. Yet none of them did. The leadership and structure of the NT church was not an official hierarchy with one man at the top. It was leadership by relationship, character and cooperation. What is especially important is that each of these men had opportunities to make a claim for the position of Leader of the Movement.

The Roles of Peter, James and John

Peter didn't consider himself to be the leader of the movement. He didn't appoint himself to such a role despite having been one of Jesus' closest friends and having been given the "keys to the Kingdom." In his first epistle, Peter simply describes himself as a fellow elder:

1 Peter 5:1

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder,

Consider Peter in Acts 11. When the Jewish Christians criticized him for going into the house of a Gentile, Peter made no attempt to defend himself by claiming a special title or role. He didn't tell them "look, I'm the leader of the movement and you need to trust that God is working through me." He didn't rebuke them for being unsupportive or being divisive. He didn't tell them that they were opposing God by opposing His chosen leader. He simply recounted the facts as they happened. No threats. No verbal intimidation. No bullying tactics. Just the facts.

Consider Paul's letters, especially what he wrote to the Galatians and Corinthians:

Gal 1:13-24

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵ But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus.

Take a close look at verses 15 -17. Paul says that after getting his calling from God, he did not consult any man, nor did he go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before he was. Notice that there was no universally recognized leader who Paul needed to serve under in some type of hierarchical organization.

Note that Jesus didn't send him to Jerusalem to meet with Peter. Note that Paul wasn't told to submit to a formal organizational structure as in "okay, Paul, you're going to be Gentile World Sector Leader. Peter is the leader of the movement so be sure you get together with him for discipling time. Make sure you find out how Peter runs his ministry and how he wants to collect stats every week."

There was no formal, hierarchical organization to which Paul had to fit into. None. Paul went immediately into Arabia and began to preach the Gospel.

¹⁸ Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. ²⁰ I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. ²¹ Later I went to Syria and Cilicia. ²² I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. ²³ They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." ²⁴ And they praised God because of me

Here we see that finally, three years after becoming a Christian, Paul goes up to Jerusalem to meet Peter and James. Paul doesn't give us any other details about this meeting.

Gal 2:1-10

Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. ² I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. ³ Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. ⁴[This matter arose] because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. ⁵ We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.

⁶ As for those who seemed to be important—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance—those men added nothing to my message. ⁷ On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. ⁸ For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

This passage tells us a great deal about the structure of the New Testament church. Let's take a look at how Paul viewed the other apostles. He says he spoke to "those who seemed to be leaders." Note the absence of any special titles or organizational structure. Notice he doesn't say "I met with the lead evangelists and the World Sector Leaders." There

doesn't appear to be any clearly defined, hierarchical leadership structure in the churches based on Paul's comments here.

Later on in verse 6 Paul writes "As for those who seemed to be important – whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance-those men added nothing to my message." Here again, we see no formal titles or hierarchy. Paul is speaking about the original apostles and he says only "whatever they were makes no difference to me." He doesn't refer to any of them as the leader of the movement, even more, he says that God doesn't judge by external criteria. He's basically saying, "I don't care what their titles are because God doesn't care."

It's also important to note that the most influential apostles in Jerusalem did not try to impose their authority on Paul and tell him that he had to serve *under* their leadership. Neither James, Peter or John attempted to act in the role of leader of the movement. Paul says that these men added *nothing* to his message. He wasn't told to report to them for disciplining times, he wasn't told to be unified with them in the way they ran their ministry, he wasn't told or asked to do anything except remember the poor!

I believe this speaks volumes about the unscriptural nature of the title and role of "leader of the movement." I believe these verses show us unequivocally that neither Peter, James nor John were considered the undisputed leader of the church.

The Role of Paul

First of all, Paul never made any claim to leadership of the movement. He refers to himself² in various ways: as an apostle, a servant, a minister, a teacher, a herald, the least of the apostles, the least of God's people and the worst of sinners.

Consider what he wrote to the church in Corinth:

1 Cor 3:1-9

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly-mere infants in Christ.

² I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. ³ You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling

² For a more detailed look at Paul's view of leadership, see the section on Authority

among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? ⁴ For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?

⁵ What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

The problem in the church in Corinth was that the Christians were considering some leaders to be more important than the others. This is why some were claiming to follow Paul, Cephas or Apollos. Notice how Paul deals with this type of thinking. He describes himself and these other men by saying that they are “only servants.”

Note that he doesn't say anything like: “well let me explain to you the setup and structure of the church. I'm the leader of the movement. Cephas is the World Sector Leader for the Jewish World Sector and he's under me. Apollos is also under me and I disciple him. He's the Geographic Sector Leader for the Greek States.” Paul says nothing even remotely similar to this! He says they're *only servants* - not Sector Leaders, GSL's, Lead Evangelists, Kingdom Elders or any other invented title.

A very good friend of mine once put it like this: “Did Paul call for the Corinthians to follow any of these men as if they were ‘God's leaders?’ Does he point to any church authority who should be over them (other than Jesus)? Did he call them to follow even himself as God's chosen leader for this generation? No, quite the *opposite*. He called on them to be followers of Jesus, to be united in Him *because of what He had done for them*. If at any time there was an opportunity for Paul to call on the believers to be followers of God's chosen leader this was it!”

Later on, in chapter 4, Paul goes into even more detail about how they should view the leaders:

1 Cor 4:1-7

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. ² Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. ³ I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

⁶ 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." Then you will not take pride in one man over against another.

In verse 6, he mentions the saying "do not go beyond what is written." What is absolutely crucial to understand is that context of this saying is that of exalting one leader over others. Think about this for a moment. The Christians were claiming to follow one man over the others. Perhaps they thought their favorite leader (be it Cephas, Paul or Apollos) somehow possessed greater insight than the others. Whatever the reason, they were taking pride in one man over against the others. It is within this exact context that Paul says "don't go beyond what is written."

It might be possible to restate Paul's point as this: "don't go beyond what is written regarding leaders." Let's ask a question then – exactly what is written about leadership positions and roles in the New Testament?

- Is it written that we should appoint one man to a position of "leader of the movement"?
- Is it written that one man should appoint himself to such a role?

I believe that the answers to these questions are a resounding "no" and that appointing one man to lead the church is going way beyond what is written in the Bible. It can also be said that the other apostles did not consider Paul to be the leader of the movement. All you have to do is read Acts 15 to see how the church handled the controversy over circumcision:

Acts 15:1-2

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." ² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

There is a lot to learn in this passage. The context is that the Antioch church was thrown into some confusion over the issue of circumcision. This confusion was caused by the "men who came down from Judea." Note that the Christians in Antioch didn't simply ask Paul to determine the issue. They sent him and Barnabas to see the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to settle the issue.

Paul did not appear to function in a "leader of the movement" type of role here in Antioch. He didn't simply give his opinion about the issue and expect others to follow. He and Barnabas debated sharply to prove these men wrong yet the church still felt the need to consult with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. They evidently didn't view him as the leader of the entire church and as such, the highest authority.

In their letter to the church in Antioch, the apostles and elders refer to Paul as simply one of their "dear friends":

Acts 15:25-26

So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul- ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Not So With You - Leadership in the Church

Finally, and most importantly, Jesus specifically forbids us from seeking positions of power and authority.

Matt 20:25-28

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord

it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave- ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Matt 20:25-28 The Living Bible

But Jesus called them together and said, "Among the heathen, kings are tyrants and each minor official lords it over those beneath him. ²⁶ But among you it is quite different. Anyone wanting to be a leader among you must be your servant. ²⁷ And if you want to be right at the top, you must serve like a slave. ²⁸ Your attitude must be like my own, for I, the Messiah, did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many."

Mark 10:42-45

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Luke 22:24-27

Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. ²⁵ Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. ²⁶ But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. ²⁷ For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

Jesus knew that the apostles would be tempted to exalt themselves over other believers because of the close relationship they had with him. He could see that their thinking regarding leadership was entirely worldly. They were thinking of sitting on thrones and having authority over others in the way that the Gentiles ruled over their subjects.

Barnes' Notes restates Jesus' words about leadership in a way that I consider to be both accurate and insightful:

"You know that such honors are customary among nations. The kings of the earth raise their favorites to posts of trust and power and they give authority to some over others; but my kingdom is established in a different manner. All are to be on the same level. The rich, the poor, the learned, the unlearned, the slaves, the free, are to be equal. He will be the most distinguished that shows most humility, the deepest sense of his unworthiness, and the most earnest desire to promote the welfare of his brethren."

The words "exercise authority" in Matt 20:25 is a translation of the Greek word "katakuriouo" (Strong's 2634)

- a. to bring under one's power, to subject to oneself, to subdue, master: *tinou*, Acts 19:18
- b. to hold in subjection, to be master of, exercise lordship over: *tinou*, Matt 20:25

Jesus tells us that we must not imitate the customs of the world in regard to leadership. HE completely turns the idea of leadership upside down. In the world, the leaders are over the people and tell them what to do. They are served by those who they rule over. They give themselves special titles such as "Benefactor." In the church it must be the exact opposite. Those who lead are to serve, not rule. They are to consider others to be over them, not under them and instead of exercising authority they are to be servants and slaves.

Jesus is saying that anyone who would seek to be first among leaders must act in the role of a *slave*. Jesus was saying to them "look, if you want to be first in leadership then understand that you won't be sitting on a throne and telling people what to do. You won't be getting any fancy titles. You won't have people serving you. Instead, you are to place yourself under everyone and you must live like a slave - putting their needs above yours."

More than any other verses in the Bible, these passages completely rule out the idea of creating a role such as leader of the movement. Jesus tells us if you're going to be first among Christians than you must be the *slave* of everyone, not the ruler of everyone.

Peter, who was there when Jesus taught about authority in the church, would later write these words to his fellow leaders:

1 Peter 5:1-3

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ² Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; ³ not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

Peter clearly took Jesus' words to heart. We see him admonishing his fellow elders to be shepherds, eager to serve and not lording it over those that have been entrusted to them.

The role of leader of the movement is completely at odds with these scriptures. It is a blatant disregard for Jesus commands regarding leadership in his church. You cannot exalt yourself over all Christians, give yourself a position of power and authority, insist that others subject themselves to your leadership and then expect people to believe that you're acting as a humble slave.

With these passages Jesus teaches us that the organizational structure of His church is not to be like that of the world. It was not to be a hierarchy of leaders in a pyramid structure with one man at the top. It was to be a family with Jesus as our Lord and everyone under him living as brothers and sisters. Those who would seek to "lead" in this family are to do it by living not as rulers, but as humble servants and slaves.

Consider Jesus' actions at the last supper:

John 13:2-17

The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. ³ Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴ so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵ After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

This is a passage whose significance is often overlooked and whose implications are enormous. Let's look at it in different translations:

John 13:3 - Today's English Version

Jesus knew that the Father had given him complete power; he knew that he had come from God and was going to God.

John 13:3-4 - New Living Translation

Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God.

John writes that Jesus "knew that the Father had put all things under his power." Allow that to sink in for a moment. Jesus was *fully aware* that he had power over *all things* or as it says in the TEV, he had been given *complete power*. He was Lord of the Universe. Everything had been given into his hands and yet what Jesus did next is so foreign to the ways of this world it is mind boggling.

Instead of exalting himself and insisting that he be served because of his staggering power and authority, he assumed the role of the lowest of servants!

John describes Jesus' actions in this way:

¹² When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³ "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Here we have the Teacher and Lord, taking the role of a lowly servant and serving those who were his disciples. Jesus tells them that in doing this he was setting an example for them that he fully expected them to follow.

If we take this passage and combine it with the passages in Matthew 2:25-28, Mark 10:42-45 and Luke 22:24-27 we get a very real picture of the way that Jesus expected leaders to conduct themselves in His church. You simply cannot reconcile the world's way of

organization (hierarchy of authority) with the model that Jesus describes here. The two are diametrically opposed.

If you read through Paul's letters you will see that he took Jesus' words very seriously. Paul describes himself in the humblest of terms and often denied himself the very rights he was entitled to as an apostle (1 Cor 9:12, 2 Thess 3:9). Over and over again, he refers to himself as a servant of the believers:

2 Cor 4:5

For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

2 Cor 4:5 The Living Bible

We don't go around preaching about ourselves but about Christ Jesus as Lord. All we say of ourselves is that we are your slaves because of what Jesus has done for us.

The word translated as "servants" in this passage is the word "slave." Paul tells the Corinthians that he and his companions did not exalt themselves in their preaching. They didn't preach themselves as something special *and* Jesus as Lord. He tells them that he and his companions are their slaves because of what Jesus had done for them.

The same can be said of the leaders in the book of Acts. You don't see them giving themselves special titles or authority. Nor do you see them creating a hierarchy of leadership with one man at the top.

What we have done is create a hybrid leadership structure which is neither completely scriptural nor completely worldly. We've tried to combine the wisdom of the world with the biblical principles of servant leadership. I don't believe that we've been given this option by God.

But Someone Has to Lead!

We also say that we need someone to lead the movement because after all, "someone has to lead." This justification fails to establish any kind of scriptural support for our claim. It

is purely human wisdom. Just pause and think about what we're saying here. Are we looking to the Bible to figure out how to structure the church? Is our line of reasoning found in the New Testament? Did Jesus tell the apostles "when I'm gone be sure to choose someone to be in charge over all the churches because you know, someone has to lead"?

What we're doing instead is looking to the world, analyzing how it views leadership and then attempting to bring what we've learned into the church. Why is it that we feel the need to import humanistic reasoning into the governing of God's church? I think it speaks volumes about where we have come as a movement when we justify what we do by saying "The world does it this way!"

Stop for a moment and consider what we're doing: we *completely ignore* the example of the New Testament in justifying the role of leader or the movement. We set it aside as if it just doesn't apply to us. Let that sink in for a moment. We set aside the example of Scripture in order to replace it with an example from the world.

Let's look at what Paul told the Corinthians:

2 Cor 1:12-13

Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

Paul says that in his relations with the Corinthians he did not conduct himself according to worldly wisdom. This verse completely contradicts the approach we've taken. Paul is saying, "I didn't look to the world to figure out how to deal with you." Yet this is exactly what we've done in saying "every group in the world has a leader so we should have one too."

Consider also what Paul told the Colossians:

Col 2:8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of the world rather than on Christ.

Col. 2:20-22 Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? ²² These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings.

While Paul was probably talking about the influence of the Gnostics in this passage, I believe this lesson applies to us: beware the influence of human tradition and the basic principles of the world on the church.

Paul echoed the same thoughts in his letter to the Romans:

Rom 12:1-2 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 apostle John issued the same warning to us:

1 John 2:15-17 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For everything in the world-the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does-comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷ The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

It completely baffles me that we can read these scriptures and yet not see a problem with what we've done. As I see it, human wisdom regarding leadership structures has absolutely no place whatsoever in the church. Its not as if this organizational model wasn't around in Jesus' day. The Roman Empire was built on precisely the type of hierarchy and power structure that we've created. Jesus and the apostles were fully aware of this type of organizational model yet they soundly rejected it and forbid us as Christians from importing such an organization into His church.

What is especially surprising to me is how someone like Gordon Ferguson can write these words³ condemning the Catholic Church's concept of the pope yet not see how we're doing the exact same thing:

³ *Prepared To Answer* by Gordon Ferguson, p. 42

“The exaltation of men ... is one of religion’s key characteristics. ...

Gibbon takes four chapters of his book to justify a pope, his basic assertion being that Peter was the first Pope and has had successors up to the present day. Human logic and reason are the basis of the arguments, with the Bible used (actually *misused*) in an attempt to shore up the logic. Gibbons, as usual, assumes the very point to be proved:

“In like manner the Church, besides an indivisible head in heaven, must have a visible head on earth. The body and members are visible; why not also the Head? The Church without a supreme Ruler would be like an army without a general, a navy without an admiral, a sheepfold without a shepherd, or like a human body without a head.”

He continues by correctly showing that God often called kings and other leaders to the forefront of his people. But the office of Pope claims authority far beyond that of any such biblical leader.”

According to Gordon, the Catholic claims in support of the position of Pope are based on “Human logic and reason ... with the Bible used (actually *misused*) in an attempt to shore up the logic.” He then quotes from a Catholic writer who attempts to prove the need for the Pope by saying:

“The Church without a supreme Ruler would be like an army without a general, a navy without an admiral, a sheepfold without a shepherd, or like a human body without a head.”

According to Gordon, this line of reasoning is nothing but human logic and reason. He condemns it as “assuming the point to be made.”

In a speech the author of RtR gave in Indianapolis in 1994 where he disfellowshipped the entire Indianapolis church, he justified his position as leader of the movement with virtually the exact line of reasoning that Gordon condemns:

“...when you think about it, every group has a CEO. Every group has a president. Every group has a premier. Somebody has got to lead. Even down in a little tiny nuclear family has a hierarchy. It's called Dad.”

Can you see the double standard here? The Catholics do it and we reject it as unscriptural. We do it and we're perfectly justified. Gordon also wrote that “the office of Pope claims authority far beyond that of any such biblical leader.” The exact same thing can be said about the office of “leader of the movement.”

Sadly, this desire to imitate the world rather than simply obey God has happened before. In Deuteronomy 17, Moses predicted that the Israelites would eventually desire to be like the other nations and would want to have a king over them:

Deut 17:14-20

When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us," ¹⁵ be sure to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your own brothers. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite. ¹⁶ The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." ¹⁷ He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

¹⁸ When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. ¹⁹ It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees ²⁰ and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.

Moses tells them that when the day comes and they want to be like the other nations by having a king, they should make sure that this man meets these criteria:

- He must be an Israelite. God told them not to place a foreigner over them, one who was not a brother Israelite.
- He must be someone who “the LORD your God chooses.” In other words, they were not to choose someone themselves, only God was to choose their king.

Eventually, that day came to pass and the Israelites asked Samuel the prophet to appoint a king for them. What happened in 1 Sam 8 is that the Israelites weren't happy with the way God had structured the leadership. Instead, they looked to the world and saw that the other nations had a king. They felt inadequate because they didn't have such a ruler. Despite Samuel's warnings, they pleaded with him to appoint a King for them so they could be just like the world.

1 Sam 8:1-21

When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. ² The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. ³ But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.

⁴ So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. ⁵ They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; *now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.*"

⁶ But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. ⁷ And the LORD told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. ⁸ As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. ⁹ Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do."

¹⁰ Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. ¹² Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still

others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. ¹⁵ He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. ¹⁶ Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. ¹⁷ He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. ¹⁸ When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day."

¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "*We want a king over us.*" ²⁰ *Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.*"

²¹ When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. ²² The LORD answered, "Listen to them and give them a king."

Read this passage over a few times. Have we not done the *exact same thing* they did? The Israelites felt that they needed to be like the world in order to be safe. They didn't trust that God's way was best. When we reject the example of the New Testament leaders in order to replace it with wisdom from the world are we not rejecting God just like they did? God didn't tell them to appoint a King - yet they wanted one anyway. God didn't tell us to appoint a leader of the movement - yet we've done it anyway.

No longer do we ask "what did they do in the Bible?" Now we say, "we're free to come up with whatever system we want as long as it doesn't violate Scripture." We don't look to the Scriptures for answers – we look to the world! And so we feel free to add an elaborate hierarchy and a position of power and authority which the NT church knew nothing of.

This state of affairs is the necessary by-product of "speak where the Bible is silent." Once you decide that its perfectly acceptable for the leaders to bind their opinions on people, there is no longer any barrier to introducing error into the church. Speaking where the Bible is silent has never worked nor it never will work because man in his arrogance will always seek to improve on the plain, simple, clear examples of the Scriptures.

All throughout the history of the church, when men decided to fill in the blanks in areas where the Bible was not specific, they ended up leading the church astray. Man is always trying to improve Christianity. That's exactly what we're doing. The truly sad aspect of this however is that we just don't see it.

The Bottom Line on The Leader of the Movement

We've seen that the New Testament church didn't have a single leader. We've seen that nowhere in the scriptures are we commanded to create such a position. So where does that leave us?

Let's make one thing perfectly clear: the author of RtR invented the position of leader of the movement and he appointed himself to it. God did not speak to him in a burning bush. He did not speak to him in a dream. Nor was he chosen by the other influential leaders and then asked to assume this role. No, he declared himself to be the "leader of the movement" and then personally chose those who would serve under him in the roles of world sector leaders. He has assumed a position of power and authority that far exceeds anything that the Apostles claimed for themselves. Think about this long and hard and consider its implications:

- Does God want one man to appoint himself to a position of power and authority that even the apostles didn't dare claim for themselves?
- Does God want one man to place himself over all Christians and bind his opinions and understanding on them?

To me, the answer to those questions are obvious. This man has appointed himself to a position that is not found in the Scriptures. A position which not even the apostles claimed for themselves. A position which flies in the face of Jesus' admonishment not to exalt yourself and not to exercise authority over others. Furthermore, he has imposed his opinions, beliefs and interpretations on all church members all over the world. Does God want one man to shape the beliefs of the entire church?

I believe that people are terribly afraid of this man. They are afraid of questioning his authority or his teaching. They are afraid of questioning the very basis of his position. And

so people just follow along - never questioning, always accepting. Such fear can be quite debilitating however. It keeps you from seeing the truth plainly before your eyes.

It is truly heart breaking to me to see our church abandon the simple, pure approach to the Scriptures that we once had and introduce these worldly, unscriptural ideas based purely on the opinion of one man. When we in our humanistic thinking feel that the simplicity of the New Testament church organization is inadequate we are simply imitating the errors of countless generations before us. The only solution for us is to reject and renounce this structure as being completely unscriptural.

5. SALVATION

Perhaps the most important matter for us to correctly understand is the way in which we enter into a relationship with God. In other words, how are we saved? What does the Bible really teach? In order to discover this, I believe we have to begin with a proper understanding of the Gospel.

The Gospel

The word gospel means “good news.” In a general sense, this good news is the message that salvation has come to all people through Jesus. Upon examining the book of Acts however, you find that the gospel was a very specific message whose elements can be found in virtually every conversion. The elements that comprise the gospel are these:

a. "Facts" to believe:

1. Jesus was crucified for our sins
2. Jesus was raised from the dead
3. Jesus is exalted as king and savior
4. Jesus will return as judge

b. "Commands" to obey:

1. Believe the gospel concerning Jesus Christ
2. Confess your faith in Jesus as Lord
3. Repent of your sins
4. Be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins
5. Be faithful unto death

c. "Promises" to receive:

1. The forgiveness of sins
2. The gift of the Holy Spirit
3. The gift of eternal life

If you examine each conversion in Acts you will see these elements over and over again. These things are what constitute “the gospel.” I believe that you are saved by accepting this message. By “accepting” I mean believing the facts of the gospel with faith, and obeying the commands of repentance and baptism. Those who accept the gospel are Christians, where ever they are. Only God knows those whom he has accepted.

In Acts 2:47 we see that “*the Lord* added to their number daily those who were being saved.” It is God alone who adds people to His body, not us. We don’t have the power or authority to determine that.

The question then is this: Exactly how does one get added to the church? The answer is this: By accepting the gospel (Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection) through faith and obeying the commands of repentance, confession and baptism. Anyone who obeys the gospel is added by God to the body of Christ, the church. God's church then, is both universal (comprised of all believers all over the world) and local (believers in a particular area or congregation.)

However, the way people became Christians in the book of Acts is not the way people become Christians in our church. The message that the apostles preached was the gospel in all its power and simplicity. They simply did not do any of the things we do with people. Furthermore, the emphasis in their teaching was not discipleship but rather faith.

Conversions in the Book of Acts

A close study of each of the conversions and sermons in the Book of Acts demonstrates some glaring problems in how we study with people. You don't see the apostles showing people a list of the characteristics of a disciple before they got baptized. You don't see them doing a nine-part study series with people. You do see people getting baptized quickly after brief “lessons” or sermons. Why don't we do things this way?

Think about this for a moment. Clearly, something is wrong here. The questions for us are very simple. Why don't we do exactly what we see people doing in the book of Acts? Why do we do “the studies” with people? Why do we add all the things we add if we don't see them done in the Scriptures?

In defending what we do, you can argue that the conversions in Acts are simply summaries of what is taught elsewhere in the Scriptures. You might also argue that the book of Acts was written by Luke and his gospel contains the most references to discipleship. This argument says that Luke didn't include the references to discipleship in Acts because he had already written about them in his account of Jesus' life (the gospel of Luke). As a result of this, we must not over emphasize the conversion accounts in Acts. You might point out that these verses:

Acts 2:40

With *many other words* he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."

Acts 8:34-35

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?"³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and *told him the good news* about Jesus.

Acts 16:31-34

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."³² Then *they spoke the word of the Lord* to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.

These verses don't give us exact details as to what was taught. For example, in Acts 2 it says Peter spoke "many other words" but we don't know what those words were. In Acts 8 it simply says the Philip told the eunuch "the good news about Jesus" and in Acts 16 the Bible says that Paul and Silas "spoke the word of the Lord" to the jailor and his family. You could speculate that in these "other words" were additional teaching about discipleship.

This argument seems to make a great deal of sense. However, I believe it has several crucial flaws.

The issue we're really addressing is this: are the conversions in the book of Acts reliable examples of how people can become Christians today? Are the messages that we see

being preached in the book of Acts reliable for salvation or must we add more material from other books of the New Testament? In their book on Biblical interpretation, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart give the following guidelines to help us determine when an example in the book of Acts is meant to be followed by modern day Christians:

"The decision as to whether certain practices or patterns are repeatable should be guided by the following considerations:

The strongest possible case can be made when only one pattern is found (although one must be careful not to make too much of silence), and when that pattern is repeated within the New Testament itself.

When there is an ambiguity of patterns or when a pattern occurs but once, it is repeatable for later Christians only if it appears to have divine approbation or is in harmony with what is taught elsewhere in Scripture.

What is culturally conditioned is either not repeatable at all, or must be translated into the new or differing culture."

By these criteria, I would say that the examples in the book of Acts are perfectly sufficient for salvation. The messages/sermons that were preached are remarkably similar: there is one basic pattern that is repeated throughout the entire book. Also, the rest of the New Testament letters are in perfect harmony with the book of Acts. They emphasize the gospel as the message that brings salvation (not the need to "be a disciple").

I'm not saying that God prohibits us from teaching people additional things before they can be baptized. Nor does he limit us in what we can *teach* people. I do believe however, that we are limited in what we are to *require* of people before they can get baptized. We can't add more requirements to the plan of salvation. We cannot require anything more than that which God requires. And what God requires has already been shown to us.

If you conclude that the messages or examples in the Book of Acts are incomplete and we must add the elements of discipleship to make them complete then you ultimately paint yourself into a corner. Why? Because if the sermons/messages/examples in Acts are incomplete, how do we know exactly what must be added? Who decides what the absolute

essentials are? How do we know what doctrines/ teachings can be left out before salvation and what must specifically be taught?

Consider also that the conversions in Acts 2 occurred in 33 AD. The first gospel to be written, the Gospel of Mark, wasn't written until twenty years later in the mid '50's. Luke's gospel wasn't written until 60 AD.

It is important to remember that other passages do tell us the content of the message that was preached. Read through Peter's "sermons" in Acts 3 and 10. Read what Paul preached in Acts 13 and 17. Each of these passages show us the gospel message being preached. It is wrong then, to assume that the conversions in Acts present just an "outline" of what is to be preached and we *must* add more details. I believe that the messages preached in Acts are completely sufficient for salvation: today, tomorrow and until Jesus returns.

I'm not saying that it's wrong for us to expound or explain the scriptures to people. What I'm saying is that the message of the Gospel as presented in the book of Acts is all we need to be saved. Its perfectly alright to go into more detail if the individual needs it but we don't *have* to add any more information than what we see in the Scriptures.

The gospel that was preached in Acts was a very simple message that could be accepted in a very short time. When we study the Bible with people we add virtually every major point of our church's doctrine to the message. We don't even realize what we've done. Imagine this scenario:

I'm at the beach one day and I see a man sitting there reading the Bible. I walk up to him and say "I noticed you're reading the Bible. What are you reading?" He begins telling me that he was raised as an atheist but recently he's begun searching for God. He tells me that he has started to read the Bible but he's having a hard time making sense of it.

Seeing that this man is searching for God, I simply preach the gospel to him as it was done in the book of Acts. In excitement and joy he decides right there to accept the gospel by faith. He decides to repent of his sinful life and live in obedience to Jesus. He confesses with his mouth "Jesus is Lord." Then, pointing to the water, he tells me: "Look, there's plenty of water! Why shouldn't I get baptized right now?!" So we go into the water and I baptize him for the forgiveness of sins.

The next day I bring him to church and full of joy I tell my Bible Talk leader: “Hey, you have to meet Joe, I baptized him yesterday!” My leader looks at me with a puzzled expression. Our conversation would probably go something like this

“Who’s Joe?”

“Well, I just met him yesterday and I baptized him at the beach.”

“You mean you did *all* the studies with him in one day?”

“Uh, no. Actually, I preached the gospel to him, he accepted it by faith, he repented and confessed Jesus as Lord. So I baptized him.”

“What are you talking about? Didn’t you do Discipleship with him?”

“No”

“You didn’t go over tithing?”

“No”

“You didn’t make sure he knows that we’re the only church?”

“No”

“You didn’t tell him that he has to be at all the services?”

“No”

“You didn’t bring in another brother to count the cost with him to make sure he was solid and had a clear grasp of discipleship?”

“No. Honestly bro, I just read exactly what Peter said in Acts 2, 3 and 10 and then what Paul said in Acts 13 and 17. I figured if it was good enough for Peter and Paul it would be good enough for me.”

If I did something like this I would probably get rebuked! I would probably be told that I was prideful and that I thought I knew better than the leaders. I might also be told that I was being independent. Probably a few people would think I had gone off the deep end. People might say things to me like “you can’t just do that. You have to be thorough with people and you have to go over tithing, attending all of the church’s meetings, dating guidelines and getting discipled. Its not that simple.”

The fact is that the manner in which we study with people and the content of the studies themselves come directly from one man. Since he is the leader of the movement, we have all accepted his way of doing things and his opinions and understanding of the Scriptures. The question for us becomes this: Is this man right in his understanding?

In RtR, he explains how he came to develop the studies:

“Early on I developed a series consisting of nine Bible studies on the “first principles” (Hebrews 6:13). The members of the church were called to memorize these studies and then teach others to become Christians. The most impacting was called “Discipleship” where, from my study of Scripture, I taught what was clear in Acts 11:26: SAVED = CHRISTIAN = DISCIPLE, simply meaning that you cannot be saved and you cannot be a true Christian without being a disciple also.

I purposely developed this study to draw a sharp biblical distinction between the Lexington (later renamed Boston) Church of Christ and all other groups. I taught that to be baptized, you must first make the decision to be a disciple and then be baptized. I saw that people in and outside of our fellowship had been baptized without this understanding and then, in time, developed a disciple’s commitment to make Jesus Lord of their entire life.”

I believe we have placed an undue amount of importance on the word “disciple.” In Acts chapter two those who were newly baptized were not even called disciples but rather “believers.” In fact, the word “disciple” does not appear in *any* of the sermons in Acts. Nor does the phrase “baptized as a disciple.”

What is especially telling is that the word “disciple” doesn’t appear after the book of Acts. Paul never uses the word. Not even once. Neither does Peter, James, John or Jude. What we’ve done is re-define disciple to mean specifically a person who is doing all the things we outline in the discipleship study. The first century church did not use this strict, exact definition. They certainly didn’t place the emphasis that we place on it. We never think to call someone a “believer” yet that word appears quite often in Acts to describe Christians.

The problem comes in that no one ever measures up to all of the elements of discipleship all the time - its ludicrous to assume that anyone can. By our standards no one - including our own church members - can pass this test. Having examined some of the conversions in Acts and the preaching of the apostles, now let’s take a look at what we teach about salvation.

Our View of Discipleship

Our church teaches that in order to be saved, you have to first make a decision to be a disciple. What we mean is that you have to be taught the definition of a "disciple" as found in the Gospels. Our logic goes like this:

1) Matthew 28:18-20

- Jesus wants us to go make disciples. Therefore, since Jesus came to make disciples only disciples will be saved.

2) Mark 1:14-18

- A disciple understands that his purpose is to be a fisher of men, in other words, his purpose is to make disciples.

3) Luke 9:23-26

- A disciple must decide to deny himself on a daily basis.

4) Luke 14:25-33

- A few points are made here:

i. A disciple must love Christ more than any person, or even your own life

ii. A disciple must count the cost to follow Jesus

iii. You must be willing to surrender everything to God

5) Matthew 28:18-20

- disciples should be making other disciples.

What we go on to teach is that if you weren't specifically taught these things (among others) then your understanding of following Jesus was inadequate. Our thinking is that Jesus told us to go make disciples, he defined what he meant by a disciple, therefore we have to teach these things as the standard for salvation.

Here are some statements taken from our web site regarding what we teach about salvation:

"The requirements for membership are no different from those of the first century church. Every member must hold the Bible to be God's inspired word (2 Tim. 3:16)."

"Every member, relying on the grace of God, must accept Jesus, not only as personal savior, but as Lord of every area of his/her life (Luke 9:23)."

I'm in agreement here but this statement is not as plain as it seems. It will be used to disqualify the salvation of other groups on the grounds that when they were baptized they weren't specifically taught this concept of "lordship" or as we call it "discipleship." I'll elaborate more on this below.

"Every member must be born again (immersed in water as a believing, committed adult for the forgiveness of sins) (John 3:1-5; Acts 2:38)."

We write that you must be immersed as a "committed" adult. This word is put here to show that other people were not in fact, totally committed to Jesus when they got baptized and therefore were not really saved.

These two areas are where we believe other people fall short. What we teach is that you have to be taught what a disciple is (as outlined in the discipleship study) and then you must be baptized with the understanding that you will live as a disciple. Hence, you must be "baptized as a disciple."

Our Purpose as Christians

"And every member must have the same purpose as Jesus - "to seek and save the lost." (Luke 19:10; Heb. 12: 15).

This statement is one that I believed for many years. It seems to make perfect sense. Jesus came to seek and save the lost and 1 John teaches us this:

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

Therefore, our logic is that since Jesus came to seek and save the lost, and we're supposed

to “walk as Jesus did” then we too must seek and save the lost. I now believe this thinking is the result of misuse and misunderstanding of scripture.

Jesus’ purpose was to die on the cross to take away our sins and then be raised to life so that we could live with him and the Father in heaven. That is not our purpose! Before I go any further, an important point needs to be made here. I am not implying that this absolves us of any responsibility to bring the saving message of Jesus to a world that doesn’t know him. Clearly that would not be right. Living a life of love for God and others means that you will want to let non-believers know about God. As Peter and John said in Acts 4:20 “...we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

However, there is an important distinction to be made here between Jesus’ purpose and ours. We have not been sent to take away the sins of the world as Jesus was. I believe that Jesus made it very clear what God wants our “purpose” to be:

Mark 12:28-31

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

²⁹ "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

God wants us to love him totally and completely. We are his dearly loved children. This is our purpose: to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love others as we love ourselves. Making disciples is a vitally important part of who we are. It is not however what defines our relationship with God.

I think there is a very subtle and unintended consequence to the idea that “our purpose is to make disciples.” I think this idea devalues your worth as a child of God. It’s as if we’re saying that your only value to God is when you bring *other people* to him. We’re saying that God doesn’t love you for who you are, he loves you because you bring other people to him. Its like saying you don’t matter, other people do.

Our unique doctrine

Concerning our unique doctrine, the web site article goes on to say this:

“Certainly we do not have a corner on the truth. Our Bible is the same as everyone else's. It is possible for anyone anywhere to read, apply God's word and become Jesus' disciple; however, it is difficult for most people to see through the traditions with which they were raised without someone to help.

Some people have become disciples on their own, but they are always eager to unite themselves with a group who is teaching and practicing what they have found to be Christianity according to the Bible. We are aware of no other group anywhere today that teaches and holds to these standards for every member to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and a member of his church...”

“There are several things that make us (the ICC) unique.

First, we are committed to continually searching the Bible for truth about our lives and God's will for us as His church.

Second, we believe and expect every member of the church to be fully committed to living according to that truth.

These convictions, as straightforward and obvious as they may seem, do not characterize the convictions of most of the religious world around us. To our knowledge, **we are the only group that teaches the biblical principle of discipleship as a necessary part of the salvation process.** ”

To examine these statements, I examined each of the conversions in the book of Acts as well as each of the sermons. The phrase "baptized as a disciple" or "totally committed" do not appear in the scriptures. Neither does the word “discipleship.” More on this later.

Let me say that I completely agree that you must decide to commit your life completely to Jesus. I agree that a half hearted commitment will not be acceptable to God. The problem comes in the idea that if you were not specifically told each element of discipleship you can't possibly be a Christian.

When you repent, you make a conscious decision to both stop sinning and start living in obedience to God. Repentance is not just a decision to stop sinning, it has a positive counterpart as well, which is the decision to live your life according to the scriptures. You may not know what all the scriptures are, but whatever they say you will do.

My point is that the concept of discipleship (the decision to give God complete and total devotion) is encompassed in repentance. When you decide to repent, you decide to stop sinning and start living in obedience to Jesus. When you confess with your mouth that "Jesus is Lord," you're acknowledging the decision you've made that Jesus is the master whom you now serve. The word Lord means "supreme in authority."

What we've done is search through the four gospels and pulled out the things we think are essential for salvation. Then we've determined that anyone who hasn't been taught these things never became a Christian. There are several reasons why I don't believe that we ought to do this.

First of all, no one who gets baptized can claim that they had a perfect understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. There will always be things about following Jesus that we don't know. No one can claim to have understood "discipleship" completely. What we say is that you must have had the specific knowledge of these things or your conversion is not genuine. However, when we see people becoming Christians in the post-resurrection era we do NOT see the apostles emphasizing the things we teach.

Following this same logic that we use, I could do the same thing with belief. I could go through the gospels and pull out every command dealing with belief. I could then come up with a "Believer Study" which will demonstrate the true biblical definition of a "believer." (I'll do this so that I can filter out all the bogus, so called "believers" in the world and start my own restored, true church.)

For example, in my hypothetical Believer Study, I'll make the point that one of the characteristics of a "believer" is that he doesn't doubt when he asks God. Once I've completed this study I'll say to people "did you know that a believer doesn't doubt God? What? You've doubted God before? Well clearly you're not a true "believer" if you've doubted God. After all, believers don't doubt. You've doubted, therefore you never became a true believer." Clearly, this would be the wrong way to teach about faith and belief.

Upon our conversion we begin a lifetime of learning new things about God, his character and his will for our lives. Our salvation, thankfully, is not dependent on our having been taught every single point of doctrine in the New Testament. The gospel message that was preached in Acts was a simple message that people could respond to immediately by faith.

Carl Ketcherside once wrote: “The gospel, by etymology, is good news. It is not a system of doctrine, a philosophy of life, a compilation of laws, or a code of ethics. It is good news about a person (Jesus) and what that person has done for us in our hopeless, helpless and hapless condition. It is not a message for the saved but for the lost. ”

Furthermore, there is no scriptural support whatsoever for having people perform a series of arbitrary acts of “righteousness” to prove to another human being that they are "ready" to be saved. No one in the New Testament is told to invite four strangers to church before they will be allowed to get baptized. No one is told that they must agree to tithe 10% to the church either before their baptism. You get the point.

What is absolutely vital, however, is the faith that Jesus is the Son of God who can save us through his death, burial and resurrection, and our repentance – the conscious decision to turn away from our past, sinful lives. These two elements (faith and repentance) are essential elements of the conscious decision to follow Jesus. I believe that this, along with the confession that Jesus is Lord, is what God requires before baptism.

Consider also what Paul told the Corinthians:

1 Cor 15:3-8

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

This is the gospel! Yes, we must consciously decide to stop sinning. Yes, we must consciously decide to be obedient to Jesus. However, we dare not add to the Gospel or

seek to somehow improve upon the message we see being preached in the book of Acts. A careful study of the Book of Galatians ought to convince us of that. In Galatia, certain men tried to add on to the simple message of the gospel, telling them that it wasn't enough. Paul disagreed with this in the strongest possible terms.

Gal 1:8

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!

The warning for us is clear: don't fool with the message. Preach it just the way the apostles did. Don't try to be more thorough. Don't try to improve on it. Don't try to add things to it in the hopes of making more committed followers. Just accept it as it is. God knows what he's doing! He doesn't need us trying to "fill in the blanks."

Let's return to the question we asked at the beginning of this section: Why don't we do exactly what we see in Acts? I believe it is because we feel that this way is too easy. It's not thorough enough. It doesn't go over the "essentials" of discipleship.

Some might argue that they preached such a simple message because the New Testament hadn't been written yet. Since we have it, we need to use it and teach it. We must reject this argument wholeheartedly. The gospel is not to be changed. Not by angels, not by apostles and most definitely not by us.

6. THE CHURCH

The church is not an earthly organization in the way it has come to be understood. The church is simply those whom God has accepted as His children. We are all unworthy sinners who have been accepted freely by His grace. How can we turn around and crown ourselves as the gatekeepers who decide who else God allows into his family?

Any attempt to create a strictly defined border around the “church” is necessarily futile. It can’t be done because you cannot claim to know that which only God can know. In Luke 17, Jesus tells us that his kingdom, or his “reign” will not be readily identifiable. I believe he’s referring to the fact that those in his kingdom are in it as a result of having the Spirit of God *inside* them, not because they’re part of a particular group.

Luke 17:20-21

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation,²¹ nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."

Paul tells us that only God knows those who are his! No one else.

2 Tim 2:19

Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."

The writer of Hebrews refers to the church as those whose names are written in heaven, not on earth:

Heb 12:22-24

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,²³ to the *church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven*. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,²⁴ to

Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

As a result of this, we must be completely humble and realize that God may well be working in the lives of many different people and groups outside of ours. One of the best illustrations of this concept is the conversion of Cornelius' family in Acts 10. When arriving at their house, Peter begins by saying:

Acts 10:28

He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.

There was no specific scripture in the Law that taught this, but it had come to be the accepted understanding of Deut 7:3-12 and other verses where God forbade the Israelites from being yoked with the Gentiles. Peter had received a vision earlier in chapter 10 in which God had told him "do not call anything impure that God has made clean." What God meant by this was that the Jews should no longer consider the Gentiles to be "unclean" because God had now accepted them. They were now on equal footing with the Jews. Peter's reaction to this development is amazing in its faithful acceptance of the will of God. He simply says:

Acts 10:34-36

Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism³⁵ but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

You can see Peter's non-judgmental, humble approach to these people. Up to this time, salvation was only available to the Jews. It was a huge development for God to now accept the Gentiles as well. The Jews no longer had a privileged relationship with God, it was now available to all. As Peter says "God accepts people who fear him and do what is right." Later on, Peter defends his actions to the other believers who had criticized him:

Acts 11:15-18

"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'¹⁷ So if God gave them the

same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"

¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

The Holy Spirit came on these people after only a brief interaction with Peter. He didn't have time to go through the study series with them or explain in detail the implications of discipleship. God chose to accept these people and Peter humbly accepted that. Finally, when the issue of circumcision came up in Acts 15, Peter again recounts what happened:

Acts 15:8-11

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

Peter makes it very clear that God alone knows people's hearts therefore only He knows those who are truly his. You don't see Peter insisting that the Gentiles be taught anything more than the gospel. In fact, he strenuously opposes any attempt to bring back portions of the Law.

The One True Church

In RtR, the author writes:

"I have never believed or taught that anyone has to be baptized into the Boston Church of Christ to be saved. The Scriptures clearly teach you must be baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and then, the Lord adds you to his church (Acts 2:36-47; Romans 6:3,4; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Acts 2:41,42).

However, **I do not know** of any other church, group or movement that teaches and practices what we teach as Jesus taught in Acts 2:41,42: one

must make the decision to be a disciple, then be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins to be saved and receive the Holy Spirit.

When one is born again at baptism (Titus 3:5), one must have Jesus' heart and attitude to do anything, go anywhere and give up everything for God. After baptism each disciple is taught to obey all the commands of Jesus as one grows and goes making disciples. If this is what God teaches in the Bible, then we are God's movement....

I believe with all my heart that the Boston Movement is God's modern-day movement. For the past several years, through love, prayer, Bible study and intense conversations, we have tried to pull into God's movement the remnant of all those who are surrendered to the Scriptures and who believe God's dream is to evangelize the world in one generation. We will continue to seek other isolated disciples who may be members in false churches...

Theoretically, anyone can read and understand from the Word of God that to become a true Christian he must respond to the cross, repent of sins, make a decision to be a disciple and be baptized for the remission of sins. However, because most people are blinded by their inherited traditions, this person is rare indeed. I have traveled around the world many times through many nations, and while I have found individuals who have decided to be disciples, I know of no church, no fellowship, no movement that teaches and practices these biblical requirements of obedience to the truth...

Today when any member of the International Churches of Christ looks around in the local fellowship he or she was converted into, he or she sees only committed disciples--this fellowship could not have been seen before 1979...

I do not know of any other church, group or movement that teaches and practices what we teach. "

With these statements, the author makes himself the standard of truth. What's being said is "since *I* don't know of any group, no such group exists, therefore, we are the only true church."

The premises of his argument can be stated like this:

- What we teach is the true, correct doctrine of salvation restored from the New

Testament.

- Despite traveling all over the world many times, I have found no group that teaches what we teach.
- Since I haven't found them, no such group exists.

Therefore it follows that:

- We are the one, true church.
- We are the only ones saved.

One of the most basic rules of logic is that you must begin an argument from reliable premises. If an argument's premises are false, its conclusion will also be false. Let's examine the premises of our argument:

Premise Number 1

What we teach is the true, correct doctrine of salvation restored from the New Testament. (As he wrote "If this is what God teaches in the Bible, then we are God's movement")

This is a huge assumption which must be carefully, thoroughly examined. If what we teach is not in fact the restored, true doctrine of salvation then our whole argument collapses. Where did "what we teach" come from, in other words, what is the source of our doctrines? They came primarily from one man's own personal understanding of the Bible. I will examine our doctrine of salvation in detail later on.

Premise Number 2

Despite traveling all over the world many times, I have found no group that teaches what we teach.

Let's assume that premise number 1 is correct. Is it possible that such a group does in fact exist but that he didn't find them? Can we honestly claim to know of every single group in existence? Should we take into account that there are over six **billion** people in the world and that this fact makes sweeping, global generalizations extremely problematic?

Premise Number 3

Since I haven't found them, no such group exists.

This statement completely ignores the possibility that a group could exist entirely unknown to him. We sometimes support this by saying that “If such a group existed, they would be growing like we are and we would have heard of them. Since we haven’t heard of any group that is growing like we are, no such group exists.” Again, these are just more unfounded assumptions. It is entirely possible that a group of believers somewhere in the world could be growing numerically and teaching correct doctrine without us ever hearing about them.

We are not the standard. A group of believers doesn’t need our approval to be Christians. They don’t need to be officially recognized by us to have their Christianity validated. They don’t need to make themselves known to us. Salvation belongs to God alone. He goes on to say:

“Today, we are calling out of the world, calling out of the denominations, out of the mainline churches, out of the campus ministries all the people who desire to be part of God's restored true church and movement.”

This statement is basically saying this: “It doesn’t matter what you may currently believe. It doesn’t matter what group you are in. You need to join us to be part of God’s true church.” The article goes on:

“Most denominational congregations are predominantly only one skin color or one nationality or one economic group. The Bible teaches we can be confident that these "churches" are not of God.”

Where does the Bible teach this? Where does the Bible state that the righteousness of a church is dependent on the ethnic/economic makeup of its membership? Where is that verse?

Sadly, the author states his own opinions as if they were authoritative truth from the Bible. He assumes that if a church is predominantly one skin color or nationality it is therefore racist and they discriminate against others. This is bad logic because it ignores alternative explanations. Could it be that they are predominantly one nationality because the geographic area they are in is made up of one ethnic group?

Can you leave the ICC and still be a Christian?

“Certainly to leave the family of God, the true church, is to leave God. Many who depart are deceived by Satan into believing they can be a part of a “church” that has false doctrine and unholy lives and still be saved. This just simply is not true. In fact, why would a faithful disciple want to be part of a congregation not made up entirely of disciples? Why do people leave the church? Primarily because their faith or trust has been destroyed.”

The author writes that if you go to a church with false doctrine, where people live unholy lives you will lose your salvation. In other words, if you leave the ICC and go to any other church, you cannot be saved.

Therefore what he’s saying about us is:

- 1) We teach everything correctly, i.e. We have no false doctrine
- 2) Everyone in our church lives a holy life, i.e. We’re all totally committed disciples

Therefore, since we have no false doctrine and we’re all totally committed disciples, we are God’s true church. There is so much wrong with this it is unbelievable. This statement is wrong scripturally and it is wrong factually.

Let’s examine the doctrine issue first. Are we correct on every single point of doctrine that we teach? Consider this: earlier in the article the author acknowledged that his earlier teaching on authority was wrong:

“I was wrong on some of my initial thoughts about biblical authority. **I had felt** that church leaders could call people to obey and follow them in all areas of opinion. **This was incorrect.** I feel very badly for people who were hurt by this wrong stance.”

By his own admission, his doctrine on authority was wrong. During those years in which he taught this he was teaching doctrine that was not true, therefore it was “false doctrine.” Yet this did not disqualify him or us for salvation. Clearly, we cannot claim that *everything* we teach is 100% correct in understanding and application. We simply don’t know if it is or not. At best, all we can do is humbly ask God for wisdom as we search his Word every day.

Other examples of this individual teaching false doctrine are his mid 1980's teaching that you had to be a disciple *before* you got baptized (later changed to you had to make a *decision* to be a disciple) and his mid 1990's teaching on the definition of "personal fruit." In 1994 and again in 1995 he made it abundantly clear what it meant to be "personally fruitful." The following quotes are from speeches he made at the annual summer leadership conference:

"And I put before you, we've got a lot of people that are numb. You say, 'Why do you say that?' Cause I think we've got a lot of people that aren't personally fruitful here. Let's just ask the question. How many of you, we'll make it since last September first, have met somebody --, not a contact through somebody, but have met somebody, studied with them, and baptized them? (*Malachi: God's Radical Demand for Remaining Radical*, Manila World Leadership Conference, Aug 1994)

"Have you been personally fruitful, and let me spell it out for you. Someone you met, someone you studied with, and someone you personally baptized. Who's been personally fruitful since last year? Raise your hand. Well, it's better, but I want you to look around. These people with their hands raised are not to be commended, they've simply done their duty. But you that don't, you need to be rebuked! You're in sin! Sin of cowardice, sin of unbelief, and the sin of laziness. And you need to talk to someone right after this message." (*Preach The Word*, Johannesburg World Leadership Conference, Aug 1995)

In late 1997 however, he wrote an article that appeared in the LA Story bulletin in which he wrote:

"Let me remind you that since the Discipleship Series, we have redefined personal fruitfulness as either 'planting' or 'watering'. Therefore, let me encourage each disciple to not be a dead-end disciple, but to strive to be personally fruitful in one of three ways: One, meet someone who becomes a disciple. Two, study and become best friends with someone who becomes a disciple. Or three, to baptize your child into Christ."

With these examples, I just want to point out the absurdity of saying that the ICC has no

false doctrine. So if we have taught things wrong before the question is: what degree of “falseness” will disqualify your salvation? Why are we allowed the grace to experiment with “trial and error implementation of rediscovered truths” (as he wrote in the article) while other groups are instantly damned to hell for their incorrect teaching?

Now let’s examine the issue of unholy lives. According to the author, the presence of unholy lives in your fellowship disqualifies you for salvation. He also says “why would a faithful disciple want to be part of a congregation not made up entirely of disciples?” This statement makes the assumption that everyone in our congregations is in fact a disciple. As he wrote in another part of the article:

“Today when any member of the International Churches of Christ looks around in the local fellowship he or she was converted into, he or she sees *only committed disciples*--this fellowship could not have been seen before 1979...”

Is our congregation really composed of *only committed disciples*? Do we not have people in our congregations that are lukewarm, who don’t come to all the services, who consistently struggle with sins? Do we not have people lying, stealing, committing adultery, abusing chemical substances and committing other serious sins? Of course we do.

Consider the New Testament churches. Was the church in Corinth composed of only committed disciples? Did they not have rampant sins there? Did Paul consider them not to be true Christians? Did he call them a false church? As a matter of fact, here’s what he called them:

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:

There will always be sin our churches. There will always be people whose faith is weak. The wonderful thing about Christianity however is that God loves us anyway. His love for us is unconditional. This is not a license to sin, nor is it an excuse to discard the commands of God because he’ll just forgive us anyway

However, our position is both inconsistent and hypocritical. Other churches make mistakes, teach things incorrectly and live sinful lives so we condemn them as false

churches. We do these things yet we defend ourselves by saying “we’re not perfect, but we’re trying.” We expect God to condemn others where they fail but we expect God to cover us with his grace. Paul warned the Christians in Rome about this very attitude:

Rom 2:1-3

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. ² Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. ³ 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?

When we condemn others for living “unholy lives” and having “false doctrine” we don’t fool God. We only condemn ourselves. I’m not saying we need to accept every form of teaching in the world or accept groups who proudly tolerate sin. What I’m saying is that the conclusion that every other group on the entire planet falls short of God’s acceptance *except us*, is a completely indefensible position.

It is indefensible because salvation is not an issue of how many good things you do or how many doctrines you’re right about. No one can claim salvation by the quantity of good works they do or the absolute correctness of their doctrine. Salvation is first and foremost a gift from God that no one can claim by works, doctrine or commitment. No one can boast!

Eph 2:8-9

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

In the book published by DPI entitled *Prepared to Answer*, the writer states:

“We do not put our trust in our performance – we trust the grace of God.”

But ultimately, we *do* trust our performance (and our commitment). It’s what we point to in order to demonstrate that we’re truly the movement of God. It’s how we separate ourselves from every other group in the world. Why do we say we are the only church? Because only we teach what’s right. Only we live total commitment. Only we are growing all over the world. If we really trusted in the grace of God we would not claim any kind

of exclusive relationship with God and we would humbly accept those who follow Jesus outside of our fellowship.

The statement in RtR is also wrong based on the Scriptures themselves. Consider this verse:

Rev 3:1-5

"To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ²Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. ³Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time will come to you.

⁴Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.

Jesus is telling the Christians in Sardis that they need to repent because they are “dead.” He says their deeds are not complete in his sight. However he also says that he has “a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy”

Here you have an example where the majority of a church is considered “dead” in Jesus’ eyes. He commands them to repent yet he also acknowledges the presence of a few faithful individuals. God judges us as individuals, not as members of a group. I believe this shows us that is indeed possible to be saved despite sin in the *majority* of the people in your church. What the author is saying is that you’re status before God depends on other people – if other people in your church have unholy lives you are disqualified for salvation

This idea that only we are right reminds me of what Paul told the Corinthians:

1 Cor 14:36 *NIV*

Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?

1 Cor 14:36 *The Living Bible*

You disagree? And do you think that the knowledge of God's will begins and ends with you Corinthians? Well, you are mistaken!

Did the word of God originate with him in 1979? Are we the only people it has reached? God has been adding people to his church long before any of us were born and he will continue to do so entirely apart from us. Humility and honesty demand that we abandon this teaching immediately.

Finally and most importantly, the idea that you can't be a Christian outside of the ICC is wrong because God accepts us as *individuals*, not as church members. Over and over again, the Bible tells us that Jesus is the way to God, He opened the way to heaven for us, He took away our sins, He is the mediator between us and God. We don't need any mediator other than Jesus.

1 Tim 2:5

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

What we've done with this teaching is insert the ICC as the mediator between God and people. We're saying that you cannot have a relationship with God unless you're part of our group and that God will reject you if leave. His love for you is dependent on your membership in the man-made group known as the International Churches of Christ. We're saying the only way to God is through Jesus, the only way to Jesus is through us.

The gospel of John in particular is full of Jesus' assurances that He alone can give us eternal life and that no one can separate us from Him. Jesus lovingly calls us to follow Him, with the promises that he will never leave us or forsake us. There are so many Scriptures that teach this but I will include just a few:

Jesus gives the right to become children of God. We are not born into his family by the decision of a person but by God.

John 1:12-13

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, *he gave* the right to become children of God- ¹³ children born not of natural descent, *nor of human decision* or a husband's will, but born of God.

Jesus will not drive away those who seek him. On the contrary, he promises to bless us (we will not hunger or thirst) and give us eternal life with Him:

John 6:35-40

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. ³⁶ But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and *whoever comes to me I will never drive away.* ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁰ For my Father's will is that everyone who *looks to the Son* and believes in him *shall have eternal life*, and *I will raise him up* at the last day."

Paul said it best in his letter to the Romans, he tells us that nothing can separate us from the love of God – no man, no spiritual being, no power of any kind:

Rom 8:31-9:1

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-more than that, who was raised to life-is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long;

we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸
For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither
the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything
else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ
Jesus our Lord.

In the book of Revelation, the angels sing about the greatness of Jesus. They sing that *he*
purchased men for God with *his* own blood. *He* makes us a kingdom to serve God the
Father. Think about the price that Jesus paid to bring us to God. He bought our freedom
with his own blood that he shed on the cross. This demonstrates to us how amazing is the
love that God has for us. The only thing that can separate us from Jesus is if we renounce
Him and refuse to obey his commands any longer. That is very different from leaving one
group of believers in order to worship with another.

Rev 5:9-10

And they sang a new song:

"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and
with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and
people and nation. ¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our
God, and they will reign on the earth."

Jesus gives us the right to become children of God, not any man or any religious leader. It
is not our place to determine who God will or will not accept. God alone knows that! The
bottom line is that God doesn't need us to save people. He accepts whomever he wants to
whether we acknowledge that or not. He accepts those who accept the gospel, where ever
they are and what ever group they're a part of. Period.

In a sermon he gave in Singapore on 2/17/99 the author of RtR echoed the same thoughts:

(after reading from 1 Cor 12) "When you leave the church you are leaving the
Lord. And very often when you drift away from the Lord you get deceived by
Satan. And so a lot of our fallaways think they're o.k. with God, not really, I mean
they're conscious of and their lives start going down the drain. A lot of them

are so miserable because like the Bible says you become even more miserable since they left the Lord. Now turn to Hebrews chapter 12, right here we see what needs to happen verse 2People who fall away have fallen into bitterness..."

In no uncertain terms, he says that when you leave *our* church, you leave God. He goes on to say that people fall away because either they get weary of doing good or they have a bad attitude towards leaders. He is equating leaving our church with falling away. The idea that someone can leave our church and yet remain a Christian is never considered an option.

From another perspective, this teaching makes our church nothing more than a giant spiritual trap for the unsuspecting. We lure them into our church by befriending them, going to their home, spending time with them and having them over for dinner. We preach to them about the love of God and the forgiveness of sins all the while telling them how awesome life is "in the Kingdom." After their baptism we rejoice in their decision to become a Christian. Then at some point after their baptism we hit them with this shocking surprise: "Oh, by the way, if you ever leave our church, you're going to hell."

Are we a church or the Hotel California?

"Last thing I remember I was running for the door.
I had to find the passage back to the place I was before.
'Relax', said the night man, 'we are programmed to receive.
You can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave.'"

Hotel California

The Eagles

How many thousands of people's lives have we damaged with this horribly sinful teaching? How many thousands of people all over the world have suffered emotional, psychological, mental and spiritual damage because the religious leaders they trusted taught them that salvation would be denied to them for leaving the ICC? I have seen the damage first hand and it is devastating. How can we sit by in silence and allow this teaching to continue?

Fall Away – What does it mean?

The words translated “fall away” (or “fallen away”) appear in about six different places in the New Testament (not including parallel passages). Jesus uses the term “fall away” three times (as translated in the NIV), Paul uses it once, and the Hebrew writer once.

Here’s where Jesus uses it:

- 1) When affirming his identity as the Messiah after being questioned by John’s disciples
- 2) When telling the disciples the night before the cross that they would all abandon him. Peter objects to this and says he will never “fall away”
- 3) In the parable of the sower when he describes the third type of soil which “falls away” after a short time.

In each of these passages in the Gospels, the words translated “fall away” in the NIV are the Greek word “skandalizoo.” The definition from Thayers Greek Lexicon is this:

Skandalizoo

to put a stumbling-block or impediment in the way, upon which another may trip and fall; to be a stumbling-block

- a. to entice to sin Matt 5:29
- b. to cause a person to begin to distrust and desert one whom he ought to trust and obey
- c. to cause one to feel displeasure at a thing; to make indignant: Matt 15:12

Let’s examine each of the verses where this phrase occurs:

1. Jesus’ View of his Identity

Matt 11:2-6 (Luke 7:20-23)

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

⁴ Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is the man who does not *fall away* on account of me."

Other Translations of Matt 11:6

Today's English Version

How happy are those who have no doubts about me!"

Revised Standard Version

And blessed is he who takes no offense at me."

New American Standard

"And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me."

2. Jesus' Words to the Disciples

Matt 26:31-33 (Mark 14:27-29)

Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all *fall away* on account of me, for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'

³² But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

³³ Peter replied, "Even if all *fall away* on account of you, I never will."

Matt 26:31 *Today's English Version*

Then Jesus said to them, "This very night all of you will *run away and leave me*, for the scripture says, 'God will kill the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'

Matt 26:31 *The Living Bible*

Then Jesus said to them, "Tonight you will all *desert me*. For it is written

in the Scriptures that God will smite the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.

3. The Parable of the Sower

Mark 4:16-18

Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly *fall away*.

Luke 8:13

Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they *fall away*.

What is the context of these passages? Do these passages refer to a person leaving a group of believers? Absolutely not. These passages deal with abandoning, deserting or being offended by *Jesus*. Leaving the ICC and leaving Jesus are two entirely different things. It is the height of arrogance to equate our group with Jesus Himself as in “if you leave us, you leave Jesus.”

Let’s look at the passage in Galatians where Paul uses the word:

Falling Away from Grace

Gal 5:4

You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

Here in Galatians, the words “fallen away” in the NIV are a translation of this Greek word:

Ekpiptoo - 1601

to fall out of, to fall down from

1. properly: Acts 12:7
absolutely: Mark 13:25

2. metaphorically,
 - a. to fall from a thing, to lose it: Gal 5:4
 - b. absolutely, to perish; to fail 1 Cor 13:8

What is the context of this passage? Does it refer to leaving a group of believers? Absolutely not. It refers to being alienated from the grace of God by seeking to be right with Him by your external performance. Let's look at another translation:

Gal 5:4 Today's English Version

Those of you who try to be put right with God by obeying the Law have cut yourselves off from Christ. You are outside God's grace.

Finally, let's examine the word as it appears in Hebrews:

Abandoning the Faith

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,⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age,⁶ 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.

Heb 6:4-6 Today's English Version

For how can those who abandon their faith be brought back to repent again? They were once in God's light; they tasted heaven's gift and received their share of the Holy Spirit;⁵ they knew from experience that God's word is good, and they had felt the powers of the coming age.⁶ And then they abandoned their faith! It is impossible to bring them back to repent again, because they are again crucifying the Son of God and exposing him to public shame.

The words in verse 6 which say “fall away” in the NIV are the Greek word parapiptoo:

Parapiptoo – to fall beside a person or thing; to slip aside; hence, to deviate from the right path, turn aside, wander:

The UBS Handbook recommends the translation used by the TEV. According to them, the phrase in verse 4, “Abandon their faith” may be expressed as "cease believing" or "cease to trust in Christ." And be brought back to repent may be expressed as "cause to repent again." For another verse which deals with this theme see Heb 10:26-31.

Summary

Our use of the word “fall away” to refer to people who leave our church is Biblically irresponsible and arrogant. Think about this for a moment: the passages we have looked at have nothing to do whatsoever with leaving a particular group of believers. Yet we use the term to describe anyone who leaves our church for any reason whatsoever. We even use the term “fall aways” on our official stat sheets to record people who leave. It appears however that we have used this word without ever having studied it in the Scriptures.

The Synagogue, The Pharisees and Us

The idea of threatening people with saying “if you leave our group you can’t be right with God” is not new. It is as old as the New Testament itself. In John chapter 9, Jesus healed a man who had been born blind. The man’s parents did not want to say anything good about Jesus however because the Jews had “decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue.” This threat was not taken lightly. In order to understand how fearful and intimidating this threat was, you have to understand the importance of the synagogue in the lives of the Jews.

The synagogue was the center of Jewish religious life. The synagogue system itself was believed to date all the way back to Moses, as a result, it was enormously important to the average Jew. It was considered primarily a place to go for instruction in the Law. Typical worship services would consist of prayers, readings from the book of the Law, a sermon and giving to the poor.

Nelson’s Bible

Synagogues also served other functions as well. Sometimes they were local courts of justice which could sentence the offender as well as inflict the punishment of scourging (Matt 10:17; 23:34). The synagogue was also an elementary school for teaching children to read. It was, no doubt, a center of social life for the Jewish community.

In a very real sense, the synagogue was the “church” for the Jews. It was where they went to learn about God’s word and to “fellowship” with others . On a psychological and social level, it was an individual’s membership and attendance that identified them as a Jew, that is, as one of God’s chosen people. As such, being thrown out of the synagogue was a disturbing, frightening thought for the common Jew.

Excerpt from Barnes’ Notes:

Among the Jews there were two grades of excommunication; the one for lighter offences, of which they mentioned 24 causes; the other for greater offences. The first excluded a man for 30 days from the privilege of entering a synagogue, and

from coming nearer to his wife or friends than 4 cubits.

The other was a solemn exclusion forever from the worship of the synagogue, attended with awful maledictions and curses, and an exclusion from all contact with the people. This was called the curse, and so thoroughly excluded the person from all communion whatever with his countrymen, that they were not allowed to sell to him anything, even the necessaries of life . It is probable that this latter punishment was what they intended to inflict if anyone should confess that Jesus was the Messiah: and it was the fear of this terrible punishment that deterred his parents from expressing their opinion.

A synagogue was led by a group of elders. Only these elders of the synagogue had the power to excommunicate someone. They were therefore men of substantial religious influence. In threatening to throw anyone out of the synagogue for believing in Jesus, they were completely abusing their authority. They were exercising leadership through fear and intimidation. For many Jews, this threat was enough to keep them from following Jesus despite witnessing the miracles. Afraid of the repercussions of being thrown out, many simply kept quiet and got in line with whatever the Pharisees and elders taught.

John 12:42-43

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;⁴³ for they loved praise from men more than praise from God.

Think about the parallels for a moment. These Jewish leaders reached a conclusion about Jesus – that he was a dangerous false prophet possessed by demons. Then they attempted to bully people into reaching the same conclusion by the threat of throwing them out of the synagogue. They tried to prevent people from thinking for themselves and reaching a rational, logical conclusion about Jesus' identity. They also tried to manipulate people through personal attacks and emotionally loaded language. Consider this:

John 7:45-49

Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring him in?"

⁴⁶ "No one ever spoke the way this man does," the guards declared.

⁴⁷ "You mean he has deceived you also?" the Pharisees retorted. ⁴⁸ "Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him?" ⁴⁹ No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law-there is a curse on them."

The leaders sent some guards to bring Jesus in. However, the guards were amazed at Jesus' words and didn't do as they were commanded. You don't see the Pharisees examining Jesus' words or considering that *they* might be wrong. Instead, they respond by saying that anyone who thinks highly of Jesus is "deceived." Then they mock Jesus' followers by calling them a "mob that knows nothing of the law."

Let's follow the story:

John 7:50-52

Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, ⁵¹ "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?"

⁵² They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee."

Nicodemus tries to temper their cynicism by appealing to the Law. He seems to be saying that they should try to listen to Jesus more carefully before reaching a conclusion. They respond by throwing an insult at him (implying that he's a Galilean) and shutting down the communication with a thought stopping phrase (a prophet doesn't come out of Galilee).

From Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary:

"Galilee was inhabited by a "mixed race" of Jews and heathen... After conquest by Tiglath Pileser, king of Assyria, (about 732 B.C.), Galilee was re-populated by a colony of heathen immigrants (2 Kings 15:29; 17:24). Thus the Galilean accent and dialect were very distinct (Matt 26:69,73). For this and other reasons, the pure-blooded Jews of Judea, who were more orthodox in tradition, despised the Galileans (John 7:52)."

These Jewish leaders were not humbly searching for the truth. They were convinced that they alone already had the truth. They were not open to any outside ideas, even from one of their own leaders (Nicodemus). If you disagreed with them you were “deceived” or you “knew nothing of the law.”

What made their sin especially bad is that they prevented others from seeing the truth about Jesus. In abusing their position of authority Jesus said they “shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.” Their actions made Jesus angry! They positioned themselves as the only way to God and they manipulated, insulted and intimidated those who disagreed with them.

Matt 23:13

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Luke 11:52

"Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering."

They claimed to be the only means to the knowledge of God. In maligning Jesus and intimidating people with threats, Jesus said they hindered people from knowing God.

Do you see the parallel? We're doing the same thing as the Pharisees! We tell people “if you think you can go to any other church and still be saved you're deceived by Satan.” This is a sickening example of emotional manipulation. This type of statement is designed to throw you off guard and cause you to doubt yourself. If you say, “No, I really believe in what I'm doing” we say, “well, its just cause you're deceived.” How do you counter that? Any evidence you offer in support of your position is merely more evidence of your own self deception.

We tell them “if you leave our church you leave God and you'll be sent to Hell.” If someone publicly disagrees with us we call them “disgruntled, bitter ex-members.” Is this the attitude of humble men and women who consider themselves nothing? Is it a message that leads to growth and freedom in Christ or is a message that enslaves people to one

man's opinion and one group of people? Are we really pointing people to Jesus, or are we pointing them to us and our group?

Jesus described his ministry with these words:

John 10:11

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Matt 11:28-30

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Luke 4:18-19

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

He described the "ministry" of the Pharisees and experts in the Law in this way:

Matt 23:4

They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

Matt 23:15

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.

What are we really doing? Jesus came to proclaim freedom, release the oppressed and provide rest for our weary souls. The Pharisees however, exalted themselves to the position of "God's official spokesmen" and assumed the right to speak for God. They took away the "key to knowledge" because they claimed that they alone understood the Law correctly and they refused to allow anyone to reach different conclusions. They weighed people

down with a burdensome “system” that was designed to help them perform the right religious actions but only made their lives miserable.

Jesus came to release us from the burden of trying to please God by our performance. He also freed us from the need to rely on other men to stand between us and God. In John chapter 10, a group of Jews gathered around Jesus and pressed him for answers about who he really was. He told them:

John 10:27-30

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; *no one can snatch them out of my hand.*²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; *no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.*³⁰ I and the Father are one."

These were very likely the same Jewish leaders who had decided to throw people out of the synagogue for following Jesus, thereby casting their salvation in doubt. He was not afraid of their threats or impressed by their titles or positions. Instead of cowering in fear, Jesus responds by telling them that salvation comes from *Him* (“I give them eternal life”) and that nothing they say or do can effect the eternal destiny of his followers (“no one can snatch them out of my hand.”)

When he says “no one can snatch them out of my hand”, I believe that he was referring to them. I think he was saying “you can’t snatch them away from me, you can’t do anything to my people. They are safe with me and my Father.” Jesus was sending a clear message to his followers: don’t be afraid of self-appointed messiah’s who claim that they alone hold the key to heaven.

History repeated itself late in the 2nd century however when Victor, Bishop of Rome, attempted to force the bishops of the eastern churches to celebrate Easter on the same day that it was celebrated in the West. If any bishop refused to go along with him, he threatened to throw them out of the church. Other influential bishops, such as Irenaeus, rebuked Victor for attempting to force his opinion on others. One such bishop, Polycrates of Ephesus, wrote a letter explaining why he wasn’t at all frightened by Victor’s threats. In this letter he wrote:

“I, therefore, brethren, who have lived sixty-five years in the Lord, and have met with the brethren throughout the world, and have gone through every Holy Scripture, am not frightened at the things which are said to terrify us. For those greater than I have said `We ought to obey God rather than man.'”

The excellent book called *Church History in Plain English* tells another story:

“Another example of a man who refused to be intimidated by the threats of religious leaders was Athanasius, an early bishop of Alexandria. He strongly opposed the teachings of Arius, who declared that Christ was not the eternal Son of God, but a subordinate being. Hounded through five exiles, he was finally summoned before emperor Theodosius, who demanded he cease his opposition to Arius. The emperor rebuked him and asked, "Do you not realize that all the world is against you?" Athanasius quickly answered, "Then I am against the world!"

The apostle Paul also had something to say about leaders who attempt to lead by threats and intimidation:

2 Cor 11:19-21

You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! ²⁰ In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face. ²¹ To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!

Ultimately, I believe people who try to limit salvation to their particular group are not genuine spiritual leaders. In fact, making such a statement disqualifies them for consideration as someone who can be followed. Such men are not acting as Jesus did. Where he came to bind up the broken hearted and bring freedom, these leaders threaten, intimidate and enslave. What did Jesus say about such leaders?

Matt 15:12-14

Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?"

¹³ He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. ¹⁴ *Leave them; they are blind guides.* If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."

Self Exaltation

Ultimately it is pure arrogance and spiritual pride to stand up to the world and say: "Look at us! We're all committed disciples - every single one of us. We're not like all those other false churches that teach incorrect doctrine, where everyone isn't expected to be totally committed, where they're not growing and they're only one skin color. Oh no. Look what an awesome church we are. We're hard on sin! We expect total commitment! We're growing! We're multi-racial! We tithe a tenth of our earnings and more! We read our Bibles every day! We take notes during the sermon! We hug each other! We're cool and unconservative! We're the Modern Day Movement of God! "

This type of self righteous boasting is *exactly* what we do. It is spiritual pride of the ugliest kind. Self righteousness is looking down on others because of what you're doing. Being judgmental is looking down on others because they're not doing enough. We're doing both of these and we just don't see it. It's frightening.

We delude ourselves when we say things like "we don't think we're any better than any other church. We're just beggars trying to help other beggars find food." You don't have to come out and say "we're better than you" to be arrogant. It is equally arrogant and prideful to claim exclusive rights to a relationship with God based on your understanding and performance. We're saying "God *only* accepts us. No one else." Somehow, we're actually proud of making this claim. We think it shows how radical we are and how we're not afraid of offending religious people.

Consider the dangers of this position we've taken:

Luke 18:9-14

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men-robbers, evildoers,

adulterers-or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

¹³ "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

¹⁴ "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Without realizing it, we have assumed the attitude of the Pharisee. We have become confident in our right standing before God, in our doctrine and in our "total" commitment. We look down on others and brand them "false churches." We are completely deluded in our thinking. We think that somehow it is perfectly acceptable to do this because after all, we're the only church that's really growing and really getting it done. I believe that one day we will be humbled for the prideful sin of exalting ourselves above all men and claiming that we alone have earned the right to be children of God. How can we judgmentally refuse other followers of Jesus and still expect His approval?

Brokenness vs. Boasting

Does this position we've taken demonstrate brokenness, humility and utter unworthiness before God? Does this position acknowledge that we are simply God's children who have only been accepted by Him because of *His* mercy, kindness and grace?

What did Paul say about boasting about himself:

Gal 6:14

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

2 Cor 10:17

But, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

2 Cor 11:30

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

Paul even warns the gentile Christians not to look down on the Jews and boast over them (he refers to them as branches):

Rom 11:18

do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.

Consider also the attitude of the prodigal son in Luke 15. When he realized that he had sinned against father, he felt his own unworthiness as a son :

Luke 15:18-20

I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'

Jesus made a point of teaching us not to exalt our performance before God:

Luke 17:10

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.'

Consider these verses warning us about praising ourselves or considering ourselves to be something special:

Proverbs 25:6-7

Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among great men; ⁷ it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman.

Prov 27:2

Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips.

Romans 12:3

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.

1 Cor. 4:6

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." Then you will not take pride in one man over against another.

2 Cor. 10:18

For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

Philip. 2:3

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

3 John 1:9

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us.

Even our KNN videos demonstrate the self-congratulatory, boastful attitude that we have developed. Watch any given KNN and it will be full of self-praise and patting ourselves on the back. All the good things we do are shown to “prove” that we are the Modern Day Movement of God.”

Our “welcomes” at Sunday service have even been infected with this pride. We often use this time to call attention to ourselves and to the good things about us. We’ll say things like “we’re not conservative like other churches, we’re untraditional. We like to hug each other – even the guys hug! We don’t just run out after the last song, we fellowship with each other for a long time. We take notes during the sermon. We’re made up of all skin colors.”

Why do we feel this need to call attention to ourselves and the good things we do? Why not just let people see it for themselves? When you start to constantly point out the good

things you do it becomes contrived and artificial. It breeds pride. It is the opposite of humility. Jesus warned us about such doing such things:

Matt 6:1

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Matt 6:2

"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men.

Matt 6:5-7

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

The point of these Scriptures is that God does not want us to announce to the world the good things we do. What God wants is a pure, humble and sincere heart that seeks to serve Him and others out of gratitude and love, not out of a desire to be seen or recognized as something special.

Do we do things in secret so that only God will see what we are doing? No, we don't. Instead, we have special segments on KNN announcing to the whole world what we do. We place colorful charts on our web site showing how much we've grown. We boast of having the largest churches in many metropolitan areas. And why do we do this? To "prove" that we are God's modern day movement.

Judging Others

Consider this verse very carefully:

Matt 7:1-2

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ² For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

The word judge in verse 1 is "krino." This word is defined as:

Krino (2919)- to judge

a) to pronounce an opinion concerning right and wrong to be judged, that is, summoned to trial that one's case may be examined and judgment passed upon it

b) to pronounce judgment, to subject to censure, used of those who act the part of judges or arbiters in matters of common life, or pass judgment on the deeds and words of others

In verse 2, Jesus says "in the same way you judge others, you will be judged." The word for judge here is "krima" which is defined as follows:

Krima (2917)

1. a decree: Rom 11:33

2. judgment; i. e. condemnation of wrong, the decision (whether severe or mild) which one passes on the faults of others: Matt 7:2

3. a matter to be judicially decided, a lawsuit, a case in court: 1 Cor 6:7

When we teach that anyone who leaves our church has "fallen away" or when we teach that other churches are not saved because they don't measure up to our standard we are judging them. There is no way around this. We try to invent definitions for what it means to judge or we try to rationalize and explain away what we do, but the truth cannot be changed: we are judging people in precisely the way that Jesus forbids us.

Think about what we do with all other Christians. We cross examine them, we find their doctrine or lives to fall short of what God requires and then we render a verdict of guilty: guilty before God and guilty before us. We tell them that in their current state God does not forgive them and therefore we won't accept them as fellow Christians. The only way to erase this guilt is to come and agree with us in everything we teach because no one else is acceptable to God except us. We have assumed the role and position of "Judge of God's Children."

When Jesus says "with the measure you use it will be measured to you" we must take his words very seriously. We hold other churches to the standard of absolute perfection. If they fall short in any area (and they all do) we reject them as our brothers. It doesn't matter how much they're doing. It doesn't matter what area they fall short. We reject them as our brothers and sisters. We refuse to fellowship with them and we tell them "God does not accept you." We take the position that if people don't join up with us, then they don't really have a good heart. This is so arrogant it is sickening. But we just don't see it.

Think about this for a moment. God will judge us with the same severity with which we judge others. Perhaps God will use the same standard of measurement with the members of the ICC. Perhaps he will say "you were so smug, self righteous, arrogant and judgmental with my other children because you found them to be deficient in some area. Shouldn't you have accepted them as I accepted you? Well, I'm going to reject you just the way you rejected them."

This thought is haunting. It is exactly why we should never have assumed this sickeningly boastful and arrogant attitude that in all the world, God only accepts us. And why does he only accept us? Because only we understand the Bible correctly, only we teach true doctrine, only we are totally committed.

In his book *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up*, David Bercot wrote:

"Even if we are unwilling to change our beliefs ... we should (at the very least) quit being so judgmental toward others who honestly interpret the Scriptures differently than we do.

We condemn without mercy the honest interpretations of others. And in return we think Jesus is going to give us a big pat on the back on Judgment Day. But

maybe we're wrong. Maybe its our interpretations that our incorrect. Maybe Jesus will do just what He said and judge us the way we have judged others.”

In *Twisted Scriptures*, Carl Ketcherside wrote:

“When men make a test of union or communion out of some method, mode or machinery for accomplishing God's will and refuse to recognize as in the fellowship those who do not concur in their special brand of orthodoxy, they hinge justification upon faith in Jesus Christ and *something else*. The "something else" is agreement with *their* understanding, inference or deduction from the scriptures as regards that thing. Their creed is no longer simply Christ but conformity with a factional pattern. ”

Paul wrote this admonition to the church in Rome warning them not to judge their fellow believers because only God is the judge:

Rom 14:4

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone.⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

⁹ For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.¹⁰ You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

¹¹ It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'"

¹² So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.

Later on in Romans he also wrote this:

Rom 15:7

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

We have taken this verse to mean “accept those who are also members of the ICC. Anyone who is not a member of an ICC congregation, reject them as your brothers. If they wish to study the Bible with you, make sure you do a really hard Discipleship study so you can find the sin in their life to prove they’re not really a disciple.”

How did Jesus accept us? With mercy and grace. Do we accept others in the same way? No, we don't. When we do the Discipleship study with someone it is always with the preconceived idea that the person we're studying with is not a Christian. Trying to convince us that you're really a Christian is very much like trying to win at Three Card Monte. It can't be done. You will always lose. Oh, it might appear to be an even playing field but the cards are stacked against you.

Without knowing *anything* about a person other than the fact that they're not a member of an ICC church, we automatically conclude that they're not a true Christian. We will never accept them as our brother or sister. Why not? Because we have been taught that no other church teaches the correct plan of salvation, therefore there is no possible way that this person who we're studying with is really a Christian. Only when they agree to *our* understanding of scripture, study the Bible *our* way and get baptized in *our* church will we accept them.

If you do the study and the person refuses to say they're not a disciple, your leader will tell you to go back and do the study again, emphasizing the things that the person is not doing or hasn't done. I've heard statements such as “you can always find something they're not doing.”

The fact is that, of all the people I know in the ICC, there is not a single person I can point to who meets all the criteria we use to convict people that they're not a disciple, not a

Christian, not saved. On the basis of the studies, we are all as lost as those we're studying with.

You will sometimes hear people say after a Discipleship study how they were convicted of their own shortcomings as they did the study. Of course they did, because we all fall short. Of course we explain away our shortcomings while we use the shortcomings of others to "prove" that they're not really Christians. After all, we're disciples and they aren't, right?

The Restoration through Revolution article acknowledges that there are "isolated disciples in false churches" yet in actual practice I can't say that I have ever seen my immediate local leadership ever accept someone from another group. In the mid 1980's we would sometime accept those who came from the older, traditional churches of Christ. From what I understand this is no longer the case, we won't accept them now unless they're rebaptized.

In the last 15 years I have been in four churches (including two of the biggest). I have served in many different ministries (pre-teens, teens, campus, singles, Latin ministry, marrieds and performing arts). I have led Bible Talks and House Churches. In all this time I have studied the Bible with numerous individuals, some of whom seemed very much to be living like a disciple. Yet we never accepted them as one. I would go back to my zone leader and say "we did Discipleship but so and so says he's a disciple." Would my zone leader and I rejoice that we had found one of those rare, elusive "isolated Christians?" Not a chance.

Instead, I would be told "go back and do it again." I remember being told "if the guy says he's a disciple after you did the Discipleship study, it means you didn't do the study right." It was as if I must have presented some watered down version of discipleship when I did the study. I remember studying the Bible with a guy in the campus ministry. After doing Discipleship the guy said he was in fact a disciple. I couldn't dissuade him no matter how hard I tried.

My zone leader wanted to get involved so we got together and did the study again. We tried to dig up every single sin this guy had ever committed. We went in there like prosecuting attorneys, confident in our righteousness. We hammered him again and again to try to find something to "convict" him. After a steady grilling, he didn't have any more sin than the average member of the ICC but the mere presence of sin at all disqualified

him in our eyes. Looking back on this now, I cringe in disgust. Is this the way we want God to treat us?

Of course we found sin in his life, everyone has sinned – including every member of every ICC congregation. Yet we use their sin to disqualify them from salvation while feeling confident that God forgives us. This attitude is all about *us*: our doctrine, our commitment, our accomplishments. We are basing our supposed "superiority" on our commitment and performance. But what does God say?

Rom 3:21-25

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Eph 2:8-10

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Salvation is a gift of God, it is given to those who accept the Gospel through faith. It is based entirely on the grace and mercy of God. It is not by our works or our doctrine or our commitment! This doctrine has made us smug, self righteous, arrogant and judgmental. This doctrine is wrong in every sense of the word. It is wrong factually, as in $2 + 2 = 5$; and it is wrong morally, as in sinful. This doctrine must be changed. It is a collective sin against God.

Restoring the Church

In RtR, the author writes:

"The Lord allowed **me** to begin the restoration of the New Testament church...

... Today when any member of the International Churches of Christ looks around in the local fellowship he or she was converted into, he or she sees only committed disciples--this fellowship could not have been seen before 1979..."

This passage is fraught with problems. We are now exalting ourselves over other present day churches *and* over every single church that has existed since the First Century! When he says "The Lord allowed **me** to begin the restoration of the New Testament church" he's essentially saying the New Testament church had ceased to exist until he brought it back in 1979.

Let's think about the logic of this statement very carefully. According to him, The New Testament church was restored in 1979 when he started preaching:

- the necessity of discipleship in the conversion process (as he outlines in his Discipleship study) and
- the expectation that every member had to be totally committed.

These two doctrines were so unique as to distinguish the Boston congregation from every church in the world and to mark it as God's restored, true church. However, we freely acknowledge that people were becoming Christians well before this man was himself converted. These people were not taught the "Discipleship study" because he hadn't created it yet. They were also baptized in a congregation where not everyone was "totally committed." Yet they still became Christians. How could this be?

So, before 1979 it was possible to become a Christian even though you hadn't been taught the necessity of "discipleship" and you were a member of a congregation where not everyone was totally committed.

Somehow, in the year 2000, this is no longer possible. According to what we teach, there are no other Christians out there besides us. There may be some few individuals in "false" churches, mind you, but there are no other groups that we think are actually producing true Christians. This simply doesn't make any sense. How is it possible that before 1979 you could become a Christian apart from our new understanding, but it is no longer possible today?

7. TITHES, BUDGETS & SUPPORTING THE MINISTRY

Budgets & Supporting the Ministry Staff

What does the New Testament teach about supporting the ministry staff? Does it teach that Christians are to tithe to support their leaders in the way that the Israelites tithed to support the Levites?

The important passages to examine are 1 Cor 9:1-18 and 1 Tim 5:17-19. The passage in 1 Corinthians 9 teaches these main points:

- the apostles had the right to food and drink,
- to take a believing wife along with them
- and to a “material harvest” (this might be referring to clothes and shelter for themselves and their families).

Furthermore, Paul tells us that it was God himself who commanded that “Those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.”

1 Cor 9:4

Don't we have the right to food and drink?

1 Cor 9:9

For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? ¹² If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?

1 Cor 9:13-14

Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? ¹⁴ In the same

way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.

Paul teaches Timothy the same concepts that he taught the Corinthians. He tells Timothy that the elders are to be supported and he uses the same Old Testament passage about not muzzling an ox while he is treading out the grain. The idea may be that while the elder is taking care of the flock (treading out the grain) he should not have to work elsewhere to support himself (this would be “muzzling the ox”).

1 Tim 5:17-18

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages."

These verses are the only places I have found that deal directly with the issue of supporting the “ministry staff” of a congregation. It appears to be entirely up to the Christians to decide on how much to provide to support their elders and evangelists. Of course, the spiritual principles of generosity, giving and unselfishness come into play here as well. God commands that those who preach the gospel (evangelists, elders, etc.) should make their living from the gospel. It is commanded that they should be supported so that they can give themselves fully to caring for the church.

The New Testament is entirely silent however as to what amount should be collected for this support. Paul never mentions any kind of ratios or budgets to use as a guideline. He certainly never mentions tithing. He leaves it entirely up to the Christians to give out of a grateful, willing and unselfish heart. He provides no specifics to “help them.”

This is very, very different from leaders deciding on their own in secret (without any input whatsoever from the congregation) how much should be collected each week to support the paid staff, how much to compensate themselves, how much should be collected each year to start new churches and how much should be collected to help the poor. It seems that we are doing the opposite of what the Paul and the first century Christians did. In their case, the Christians decided themselves how much to give to support the ministry. In our case, the leaders decide how much the Christians should give.

You cannot use the passages in 1 Cor 16:1-2 and 2 Corinthians 8-9 to support the idea of tithing or budgeting to support the ministry either. The contribution being discussed in these passages is a contribution for the poor Christians in Jerusalem and elsewhere. The money Paul collected from them was not specifically for the support of the apostles or elders.

Rom 15:25-26

Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there.²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a *contribution for the poor among the saints* in Jerusalem.

1 Cor 16:1-3

Now about *the collection for God's people*: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do.² On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

2 Cor 8:13-15

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.¹⁴ At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality,¹⁵ as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

An early Christian named Justin Martyr⁴ wrote the following passage in the mid-2nd century describing the collection that was taken up by the Christians on Sunday. It seems to follow the same kind of thinking that Paul taught:

And the wealthy among us help the needy; and we always keep together; and for all things wherewith we are supplied, we bless the Maker of all through His Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Ghost...

And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succors the orphans

⁴ Justin Martyr, *The First Apology* chap. 67

and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.

The Book of Acts also has several passages that deal with giving:

Acts 2:44-45

All the believers were together and had everything in common.⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

Acts 4:32-37

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.³⁴ 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 sales³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement),³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Acts 11:27-30

During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.²⁸ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)²⁹ The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

It appears that the money collected by the apostles in the Book of Acts was used to meet the needs of the Christians there in Jerusalem. There is no mention of any portion being specifically set aside as a “church budget” to support the ministry staff. The passage in Acts 11 is also instructive because it shows that *the disciples* decided to give to help the

brothers in Judea. It appears that this was a grass roots effort on the part of the church in Antioch to help another church that was in need because of a famine. Note also that the leaders didn't set a pre-determined amount for them to give but rather they gave "each according to his ability."

So where does this leave us then? I think it is clear that Christians are to financially and materially support those who give themselves fully in leading, teaching and caring for the church. There are many passages that warn against the love of money and greed which must be considered any time you deal with giving:

Matt 6:24

"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

Luke 12:15

Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Mark 8:36

What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?

Col 3:5

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

1 Tim 6:10

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Heb 13:5

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

So we see that Christians must not love money nor seek wealth above love for God and others. We now have two principles/commands to work with in order to find the best

course of action in this matter: one, those who care for the flock ought to be materially supported by the members; two, Christians must be unselfish and not lovers of money. A third principle that perhaps may be borrowed from 2 Cor 9 is that of giving with a willing, not coerced, spirit. Furthermore, such giving should be determined by the individual.

Beyond this, there are no more specifics that can be commanded. Having read these passages we now have to ask some hard questions. Not that we should ask with anger or bitterness, but simply to carefully, objectively and fearlessly examine our life *and* our doctrine to be sure that we are handling the word of God correctly:

- If Paul didn't give the Christians specific budgets or amounts that the Christians should give, why do we?
- If Paul never taught that Christians should tithe to support the ministry staff (despite numerous opportunities to do so) then why do we?
- If Paul didn't monitor how much or how often people gave then why do we?

An issue that also must be addressed is that of the appearance of impropriety. This scripture comes to mind:

Ephesians 5:3

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.

Whenever people in authority refuse to reveal financial information to those they are supposed to serve, there will be the appearance, or hint, of greed. This must not be. As God's holy people, we must take the lead in being completely open and transparent with exactly how our money is spent and how our leaders are compensated. Ultimately, if a leader is living a sacrificial life as the Scripture commands, he will have no fear of publicly revealing his salary. In fact, doing so will give him greater credibility as a spiritual leader. After all, we know Jesus was fully open about his earnings:

Matthew 8:20

Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

It is simply unconscionable that a leader would refuse to reveal his salary to those Christians who are in fact paying him! Brothers, this must not be. We must assure that no hint of greed exists among us.

Tithing

The current thinking on tithing appears to be heavily influenced by the idea that portions of the OT (in this case, tithing) still apply to Christians because they were never specifically done away with. This may be why so many people have no problems reading from Malachi and insisting that Christians must tithe. The following chart shows the only areas (that I have found) where OT commandments are specifically re-affirmed in the New Testament. Tithing does not appear.

OT Reference	Commandment	New Testament Reference
Exodus. 20:3	You shall have no other gods before me	Matt. 4:10
Exodus. 20:4	You shall not make any idols	Eph. 5:5; 1 John 5:21
Exodus. 20:7	You shall not misuse the name of the Lord	James 5:12
Exodus. 20:8-11	Remember the Sabbath	Col. 2:16-17 (not renewed in NT)
Exodus. 20:12	Honour your father and mother	Matt. 19:17-19; Eph. 6:1-3
Exodus. 20:13	You shall not murder	Matt. 5:21-22; 19:17-19; Rom. 13:9-10
Exodus. 20:14	You shall not commit adultery	Matt. 5:27-28; 19:17-19
Exodus. 20:15	You shall not steal	Matt. 15:16; 19:17-19; Rom. 13:9-10

Exodus. 20:16	You shall not give false testimony	Matt. 15:16; 19:17-19
Exodus, 20:17	You shall not covet	Luke 12:15; Rom. 13:9-10; Gal. 5:21

Tithing is not re-affirmed in the New Testament either by command or by example. To say that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees is to miss the crucial fact that our righteous is by faith, NOT by observing the law. The Law does not apply to us in any way. It is not the standard of righteousness by which we should be measuring ourselves.

Rom 3:21-25

But now *a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known*, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Gal 3:10-14

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." ¹¹ *Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith."* ¹² The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." ¹⁴ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

When Jesus told the disciples that their righteousness needed to exceed that of the Pharisees he went on to explain what he meant by that:

Matt 5:19-20

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven

The problem with the Pharisees was not in their actions (or the amount they were giving) but in their heart and in their motivation. That's why Jesus told them regarding giving:

Matt 6:1-4

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

He doesn't tell them that they should give more than the Pharisees gave, he tells them not to give to be seen by men but to do it in secret. That is how we can be more righteous than the Pharisees - by giving with pure and sincere motivation.

According to the NIV Encyclopedia of Bible Words:

"In the Judaism of Jesus' day, righteousness was viewed behavioral conformity to written or oral law. [In Matthew 5, Jesus gave a series of illustrations], each illustrations begins with "You have heard," referring back to a behavior-regulating command found in the law, and each time Jesus went on to say "But I tell you..." Each of Jesus' statements focuses, not on the behavior judged by law, but on the inner heart attitude from which the action springs.

... Jesus' teaching involved a dramatic shift of focus. Rather than seeing righteousness in terms of behavior, Jesus shifted the issue to within the human personality. It is motives and thoughts and desires that God is concerned with. "

To say that what Jesus meant by "surpassing the righteousness of the Pharisees" was just doing *more* of what they were already doing is to completely miss the point of Matthew 5. To apply that line of reasoning consistently we should then be doing more of *everything* that they did. According this interpretation, righteousness is doing what the Law requires

in *greater quantities*. So if the Law prescribed giving a tenth than we should give more than a tenth.

We run into a problem with this interpretation very quickly however: why stop at tithing? In other words, if surpassing the righteousness of the Pharisees means doing what they did in greater quantities we should also be stoning more adulterers (Lev 20:10) and more blasphemers (Lev. 24:16). Consider also what we could do to surpass this command of the Law:

Lev 19:27

"Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.

If the law tells us not to cut the hair at the *sides* of our head, perhaps we could “surpass” this by not cutting the hair in the *front* of our head either. That would certainly be doing more than the Law required. That anyone could believe that Jesus wants us to do more of the Law is completely baffling to me. I believe that that is the exact opposite of what Jesus was trying to say.

The final word on tithing in the NT

The council in Jerusalem in Acts 15 and the entire letter to the Galatians should completely put to rest any idea that tithing was somehow carried over from the Old Covenant and is binding on Christians.

In Acts 15 some men were teaching that part of the Law (circumcision) was still necessary for salvation. In response, the apostle James said:

Acts 15:19-21

"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.

You can see that James said nothing about tithing. If God still wanted Christians to tithe, this was the perfect opportunity to let us know. But he doesn't. Giving under the new covenant is voluntary, cheerful and sacrificial.

Finally, if you read through the book of Galatians you see that some people want to bring back just one part of the law (circumcision) and bind it on Christians. In response to this, Paul wrote:

Gal 5:1-5

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.

² Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴ You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

In no uncertain terms, Paul says that if you bring back even one single law you are then obligated to obey the *whole law*. What's more, he says that the attempt to seek justification in obeying the law alienates you from Jesus, it causes you to fall away from grace. How much more clear could it be? All we have done is replace circumcision with tithing. They taught "if you're not circumcised you can't be saved" we teach "if you don't tithe, you're not saved."

In 1994 the author of RtR gave a speech to the entire ministry staff of the ICC in which he said:

"Secondly, we give the contribution in the discipleship group. You say, 'Well, won't everybody see what's happening?' ... And *we make sure they give their tithe*. You say, 'Why do you do that?' Because the Bible says in Malachi 3, if you don't tithe you're robbing God. And we don't want anybody to go to hell cause they didn't, they robbed God. You say, 'That's awful hard-line.' You bet your booties it's hard-line. Someone doesn't give, we ask why. We know who didn't give by the end of the discipleship group. Questions are asked. We have almost a hundred percent giving in our church. Someone doesn't give, they've got some attitudes."

These words speak for themselves. He obviously believes that tithing is essential for salvation therefore it is perfectly acceptable for them to "make sure people give their tithe." My question is this: how can you "make sure" people give their tithe by carefully

monitoring and questioning them and then turn around and say that you're not causing people to give under compulsion? He says that if people don't give its because they have "attitudes."

How can we possibly reconcile this approach with what Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

2 Cor 8:7-9

But just as you excel in everything-in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us-see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

⁸ I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.

2 Cor 9:7

Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Did Paul take up their contribution in envelopes so that he would know which of the Corinthians didn't give? Where on earth did we ever get these ideas from? What would possibly make us think that God wants us to do things this way? If this isn't an example of abusing and ignoring the Scriptures then I don't know what is.

I believe that if you personally want to tithe, that's fine. But to teach that it is still binding on Christians has no scriptural support either by example or command. Let's look at one more verse in the gospel of Luke just for the sake of being thorough. This passage is often used as a way to teach tithing:

Luke 11:42

"Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.

Some people point to this verse and say "you see, Jesus said we should tithe right here." However, Jesus' words were spoken before the Cross, therefore, it was spoken when the Law was still in effect. While he was alive, Jesus lived under the Old Covenant and he and his followers were obedient to the Law. As a result this verse does not apply to

believers in the New Covenant. To say that we have to tithe because of this verse is no different than saying you don't have to be baptized because the thief on the cross wasn't baptized. Jesus set us free from the law. Let's not go back to living in slavery, God has a better plan for us.

Thoughts on Giving from 1st Timothy

There are at least three passages in 1st Timothy that deal with giving. They are:

1. The care of widows, also referred to as the "list of widows" (1 Tim 5:3-16)

⁹ No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, ¹⁰ and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.

¹⁶ If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.

Paul mentions a "list of widows" who the church should help. This is also seen in Acts 6 where the widows had food distributed to them every day. Paul doesn't mention anything about tithing here. He doesn't say "set aside a portion of the tithe to help the widows." This is especially noteworthy because one of the tithes the Israelites had to collect every three years was specifically to help widows and orphans.

Deut. 26:12

When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the **tithe**, you shall give it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied.

Paul makes no mention whatsoever about the OT practice of tithing and its applicability for them in this situation. He sets the parameters for who is "eligible" to be on the list of widows and then he leaves it up to the church to decide how to care for them.

2. The elders who direct the affairs of the church well (I Tim 5:17-18)

the elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages."

This passage is probably referring to taking care of the elders and providing for them with food and material assistance. Paul makes no mention of taking up a tithe to provide for them however. He doesn't mention anything about a church budget either. He doesn't say that the elders should decide amongst themselves how much they're going to collect from the Christians for their salaries.

He teaches them the principle: "the worker deserves his wages", and he leaves it up to the Christians to respond out of a sincere and willing heart.

3. The rich Christians in the churches (1 Tim 6:17-19)

¹⁷ Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸ Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. ¹⁹ In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

Timothy is not given specific amounts or percentages that the rich should give. Paul doesn't tell them to tithe nor does he come up with a special contributions multiplier that they should give every year to take care of the poor.

As he did with the elders and the widows, Paul teaches a principle - put your hope in God so that you will have treasure in heaven - and then he leaves it up to the Christians themselves to act out of their own convictions about righteousness.

He doesn't come up with artificial formulas to "help" people follow through with his commands. He doesn't tell them to take up envelopes in their midweek services so that they will know how much and how often the rich are giving. It seems to me that Paul

trusted that these people, who had the Spirit of God in them, would act in a righteous manner. It shows you that he believed people did not need external, artificial pressure put on them to do the right thing.

Is this what we do? Do we simply teach the truth and give people the freedom to act out of their own faith? No, I don't believe that's what we do at all. Instead of humbly imitating what Paul did, we proceed from the basic assumption that without specific, quantifiable measures people will do nothing.

We make the following justifications:

- If we don't have people call in stats, they don't share their faith. After all, people are basically lazy.
- If we didn't have "official disciplers" people wouldn't develop close discipling relationships.
- If we don't closely monitor the contribution by using the envelopes, people won't give. After all, we're in America and people are basically greedy.
- If we don't give people a specific goal for Special Contribution we won't accomplish our objectives in starting new churches.
- We aren't as spiritual as the first century Christians so we need to do things this way

What we've done is create this artificial system to "make sure" people do the right thing. The intentions behind this thinking may have been. However, it fails to truly develop spiritually mature Christians. How much maturity and spirituality does it take to just do what you're told? Ultimately, all this system does is enforce external *behavior* such as giving a pre-determined amount or inviting a certain number of people to church, etc.

We have developed a performance-based view of Christianity that is based not on grace but on performing the correct religious behaviors. When we put a system in place to make sure we know how much people are giving, it shows that we place our trust in the *action* itself, not the heart that guides the action.

I believe this system is predicated on a fundamental lack of trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to truly work in people's lives. It's as if we think the Spirit of God is incapable of

producing godly behavior in people, therefore we need to invent a humanistic accountability system to make sure people do the right thing.

Secondly, this system communicates mistrust. When someone comes up to me with an envelope and asks “do you have your contribution?” what’s being communicated to me is “if we did this anonymously you would not give. You can’t be trusted to do the right thing on your own so I’ve got closely monitor you by checking off on a contribution form whether or not you gave.”

As with all things, lets just trust God’s wisdom and stop trying to improve on the Scriptures.

8. THE NUMBER SYSTEM

In the following study I will examine our practice of using statistics a means of measuring how a church is doing. I refer to this system as the “number system.” Let me say at the outset that I do not disagree with accountability. We are all accountable to God for how we live our lives. Also, if we love someone we will want to help them grow in their relationship with God and we will lovingly confront them when they grow lukewarm or cold.

What makes accountability effective however is the environment in which it occurs. First of all, effective accountability occurs in a good *relationship*. When you love and trust someone and you believe they have your best interests at heart you won’t feel threatened by accountability. You will be happy to discuss what’s going on in your life because you love the person and you know they’re trying to help you.

What happens within our system however is that we place people who don’t really know each other in a “partnership” where there is no trust or friendship yet. The resulting “relationship” often resembles a sales rep checking in with his sales manager everyday. It is often nothing more than a business arrangement. And it fails miserably to cultivate true, Christ-like character.

Secondly, accountability must be positive and encouraging in nature. Too often, the way in which it is practiced promotes discouragement. It communicates mistrust. It says “I can’t trust you to do the right thing because you’re lazy in nature.” It communicates “you are a child and I must watch over you everyday to make sure you do the right thing.”

Thirdly, it must be grounded in the Scriptures, not in arbitrary man-made standards. Our justification for this system is that people are naturally lazy and need accountability. Furthermore, we stress the importance of our purpose to make disciples. The thinking is that people need the stats to hold them accountable. It keeps us focused on our purpose. It helps us see where we are spiritually.

The problem is that our primary purpose is to love God with all of our hearts. Evangelism will necessarily flow from someone who loves God in this way and who is obeying His commands.

I believe this system is wrong for the following reasons.

1. It has no Scriptural support whatsoever
2. It comes from imitating the world not the Scriptures.
3. It shows a lack of faith in the power of God.
4. It fundamentally distorts Christianity and as a result, it damages people's relationship with God.

Lets look at each of these reasons in detail:

No Scriptural Support

The keeping of statistics as practiced by our churches is not supported by the scriptures in any way, shape or form. While Heb 10:24 tells us to spur others on, we must be sure that our methods of "spurring" are themselves consistent with the scriptures.

Consider the NT example:

Paul wrote letters to seven churches (although in Galatia it included several churches). In these letters he makes no mention whatsoever of: visitors to Sunday worship; numbers of studies; number of conversions. Lets take a closer look at one of the churches he wrote to, the church in Corinth.

The church in Corinth had the following serious problems:

- following personalities (chap 1)
- sexual immorality. They were even proud of their liberal attitude!(chap 5)
- lawsuits among believers (chap 6)
- irreverence and other assorted problems in celebrating the Lord's Supper. (chap 11 and 14)
- denying the Resurrection. They weren't even solid on one of the most basic tenets of Christianity! (chap 15)

Despite serious sins in their church Paul makes no reference whatsoever to how much or how little they had grown in numbers as a congregation. We often teach that God will not

bles a church (that is, provide baptisms) when there is "sin in the camp." There was abundant sin in this camp! We then conclude the following: sin in church = little growth, therefore little growth = sin in church. By our own reasoning, this church could not possibly have been growing.

Surely Paul would get in there and say: "Look! You've only grown by 2% this year! You've only had a net growth of 15! This is disgusting! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!" (I'm paraphrasing what I've heard said from evangelists). In the mid '90's, the church in San Diego grew very little. The leader of the movement took it upon himself to visit this church and speak to their lack of growth. In his own words, the first thing he did was rebuke the entire church for not growing. His rationale for the rebuke was very simple: Take a look at the stats!

Paul does nothing of the sort in dealing with Corinth. There is no mention of statistics of any kind: church attendance, number of studies, number of conversions. In his follow up letter he also makes no mention of numbers. Conspicuously absent is a phrase in II Corinthians along the lines of: "Look how many visitors you've been having! You're setting new attendance records after my first letter! I can see that you've repented! This is awesome!"

Paul also writes letters to two individuals whom we consider to be major leaders in the NT church, Timothy and Titus. By our definition, Titus was the first World Sector Leader. We are now taught that Titus was given the charge to disciple an entire area as written in Titus 1:5. Timothy was an equally influential "Kingdom Leader." In three letters Paul gives these major leaders no instruction whatsoever regarding the keeping of statistics. If he wanted them to do so he sure didn't say so in his letters.

Peter makes no mention of statistics in his letters, neither does John, Jude or the Hebrew writer. The book of Acts certainly mentions numbers but the crucial difference is that Luke merely records what happened. Also, a specific number is only mentioned twice.

In the Gospels, Luke 10 records Jesus sending out the 72. Jesus does not give them numerical goals (preach to at least 10 people everyday, expel at least 3 demons, eat in at least 2 homes a day, etc). Upon their return they make no mention of number of studies, number of conversions, number of expelled demons, (you get the idea). More importantly, Jesus himself does not ask for a numerical accounting of how effective their

“campaign” was. In fact Jesus tells them in essence: don't be so happy about your power or your results, just be glad you're going to heaven. Interesting.

The Book of Numbers

We sometimes say only half jokingly, "of course God cares about numbers, he even wrote a book in the Bible called Numbers." This statement is a great example of the way we mishandle the Scriptures. The book of Numbers has nothing whatsoever to do with our system of stats.

First of all, the “stats” in the book of Numbers were never used as a spiritual benchmark -- no one was rebuked or praised based on their “stats.” The tribe of Judah, which had more men than anyone else, was not held up in any way. Moses didn't say to them: “You guys in Judah are really blowing it out. You guys are setting the pace!” The tribe of Manassah only had 32,200 men. Moses didn't tell them “you guys are in sin. You need to get with the guys from Judah and find out what they're doing so you can start growing. Your numbers shame the whole nation of Israel!”

Secondly, it was a census not of the entire community but only of the men. Women were excluded from the total.

Thirdly, there were very specific reasons why God had the Israelites count the number of men they had. Each male from 20 to 50 years was to serve in some official capacity. The census' were taken to determine who could serve in the army, who could serve in the Tent of Meeting and how to distribute the land equitably. The Israelites were told to count using the following criteria and for the following purposes:

- a. Number by their divisions all the men in Israel twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army (Num 1:3)

Num 1:45-46 “All the Israelites twenty years old or more who were able to serve in Israel's army were counted according to their families.”⁴⁶ The total number was 603,550.”

- b. Count the Levites by their families and clans. Count every male a month old or more. (Num 3:15)

Num 3:39 “The total number of Levites counted at the Lord’s command by Moses and Aaron according to their clans, including every male a month old or more, was 22,000.”

- c. Count all the firstborn Israelite males who are a month old or more and make a list of their names. (Num 3:40)

Num 3:43 “The total number of firstborn males a month old or more, listed by name, was 22,273.”

- d. Count all the men from thirty to fifty years of age who come to serve in the work in the Tent of Meeting. This command was limited to the Levite clans of the Kohathites (Num 4:3), the Gershonites (Num 4:22) and the Merarites (4:29).

The numbers came out as follows:

- The Kohathites had 2,750 men between thirty to fifty years of age
- The Gershonites had 2,630 men between thirty to fifty years of age
- The Merarites had 3,200 men between thirty to fifty years of age

After a plague, God again had Moses count the men in the Israelite community (Num 26:1-2) so that they would know who could serve in the army and so they would be able to distribute land to each tribe.

Num 26:51-54 “The total number of the men of Israel was 601,730. ⁵² The LORD said to Moses, ⁵³ “The land is to be allotted to them as an inheritance based on the number of names. ⁵⁴ To a larger group give a larger inheritance, and to a smaller group a smaller one; each is to receive its inheritance according to the number of those listed.”

Num 26:62 “All the male Levites a month old or more numbered 23,000. They were not counted along with the other Israelites because they received no inheritance among them.”

Reading through the book of Numbers, you realize how silly it is to claim that it provides justification for our use of stats. There is no correlation whatsoever between what we do and the book of Numbers. There is a huge difference between simply counting the people you have versus using numerical goals as a spiritual benchmark to which people are held accountable.

Furthermore, there is no indication that God wanted the census to be repeated by future generations. It is especially noteworthy that when King David attempted to count the fighting men many years later, God was extremely unhappy about it.

1 Chron. 21:1

Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.

1 Chron. 27:24

Joab son of Zeruah began to count the men but did not finish. Wrath came on Israel on account of this numbering, and the number was not entered in the book of the annals of King David.

Moving on, let's look at our Lord himself in his message to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3. Here again, seven churches are addressed. Nowhere does he mention how much or how little they had grown. It's just not there. Serious sins are dealt with in his messages including tolerating false teachers and lukewarm devotion. Jesus says nothing to these churches about the number of people they had in their congregations. Nothing.

We often say "you have to have goals." This is one of those statements that is never questioned. I completely agree that there are certain areas of life in which setting goals is crucial for success. I am not opposed to goals in and of themselves. However, there are certain endeavors that can not be improved by the concept of goal setting. Let me illustrate a few examples: Can you imagine setting a numerical goal for how often you kiss your wife and tell her you love her? How about a numerical goal for how many times you hug your child? Or how about a goal for how much time you spend holding your child?

Regardless of how we try to portray the taking of statistics, it does not promote a deeper love for the lost. It does not promote a sincere love for God or a sincere faith. In fact, it stands in direct opposition to sincere love. I believe it promotes insincere love and people pleasing.

You can talk all you want about doing it in an encouraging way. It doesn't work. First of all, no matter how many times you tell them not to, leaders will pressure people for numbers (especially younger leaders). They know that having low numbers will cause them stress in the Sunday leader's meetings. They also know that good numbers will result in praise at that meeting. What happens is that they pass the heat they get from their leader down to the Christians in their group.

We say that stats are just a tool to help us see where we are as a church. I don't believe that for a minute. When your standing before God is measured by these numbers they cease to be a tool and they begin to be an idol. The stats become the very driving force of the ministry. If they're just a tool, why do we feel pressure to baptize people at the end of the month so that we can meet a "monthly baptism goal." Does God really care if someone is baptized on June 30th versus July 1st? This pressure to have good stats and the resultant desire to please your leaders corrupts even the best hearted people.

Worldly Wisdom or Scriptural Examples?

Let's ask a basic question then. If this system is not in the scriptures, where did we get it from? The answer is simple. We got it from the world. We got it from importing wisdom from the world into the governing of the church. Think about this for a moment. This system did not come about after carefully studying the scriptures and humbly imitating the examples that God has given us. It came from imitating the world. What does that say about us?

What do the Scriptures say about worldly wisdom?

1 Cor. 1:20

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age?
Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

1 Cor. 2:6-7

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. ⁷ No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.

1 Cor. 2:13

This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.

1 Cor. 3:19

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness";

2 Cor. 1:12

Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

Col. 1:9

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Col. 2:20-23

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules:

²¹"Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"?

²²These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings.

²³Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

This system has the appearance of wisdom but it produces improperly motivated, legalistic, fearful Christians.

Faith vs. Human Effort

Our system of numerical goals and accountability come from a fundamental lack of faith in God and in His Spirit. We have come to rely on this system as the means by which results are produced. Unintentionally, we have made the system itself a substitute for faithful reliance on the Holy Spirit.

We don't stop to consider that even though Jesus, the apostles and the early church did not use this system, we feel that we must. We're saying that somehow we're different from people in the first century. They didn't need this system but we in the 21st century do in fact need this system. You've opened up a huge problem with this statement however because you're saying that God's word, in and of itself, is not sufficient. You're saying that we have to add to it because the times have changed.

I've heard the following comments from leaders:

Regarding calling in commitments:

"There's a funny dynamic here. Unless people feel some heat they don't bring people to church. When we don't call in commitments, the attendance goes down"

Regarding the number system:

"People are lazy. They need to be pushed with accountability. If we don't keep stats we're just leaving things to chance"

Can you imagine someone saying "I have my wife call me every night at 9:00 to tell me where she is. This is our system of accountability to keep her faithful. I mean, you can't be naïve, we all have sinful natures. There's a funny dynamic here, when I don't have her call in and tell me where she is and what she's doing, she's not faithful to me. This system is great for our marriage! It keeps her focused on being faithful."

Visitors and Stats for Sunday Service

We have taken this system to such an absurd degree that we actually rate the attendance to our Sunday services. Never mind the fact that the 1st and 2nd century Christians did not

even allow non-Christians to the worship service.

In 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, Paul describes some important elements of the Lord's Supper:

1) It is a time where we "proclaim the Lord's death."

1 Cor 11:26

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

2) It is a time for us to examine ourselves before God.

1 Cor 11:28-29

A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.
²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

3) It is a time to strengthen, instruct and encourage the church

1 Cor 14:26

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. All of these must be done for the *strengthening of the church*.

1 Cor 14:29-32

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.³⁰ And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop.³¹ For you can all prophesy in turn *so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged*.

Is there any indication from these verses that the number of non-believers at the service should be taken into consideration and factored into how good or bad the worship service was? Did Paul even tell them to count such visitors to this service? Did he even tell them to count the number of *believers* who were there? Clearly, if he thought it was important to count the number of visitors (or believers) he would have told us to do so. Since he didn't

tell us to do it, I can only conclude that we don't need to do it and that it is entirely irrelevant to the spiritual value of a worship service.

First and foremost, the time that Christians assemble on the Lord's Day is *spiritual*. It is about remembering Jesus and encouraging each other. It is about sharing the love we have for God and each other. Spirituality cannot be measured in inches, litres or kilograms. Neither can it be measured by a man made "rating system."

We've come up with a purely imaginary ratio of 1 visitor for every 2 Christians as the standard of "good" and we judge a service accordingly. When an Elder from Los Angeles first introduced this system he told our church that the leaders in LA had made it up and that it wasn't just an arbitrary number because "we really feel that it isn't." What kind of logic is that? Is it a persuasive, well reasoned and biblical argument to say: "Its not arbitrary because we don't feel like its arbitrary."

While we're making up imaginary numerical standards we could devise a numerical formula to determine how righteous someone is. Here's how it works: A Christian ought to have five acts of righteousness for every sin he commits. This will be considered good. Over five righteous acts per sin is considered "great." Over 10 acts of righteousness per one sin is "awesome." If you have more than 1 sin per 5 righteous acts you'll be considered "O.K.." If you have 2 or more sins than righteous acts you're considered "struggling."

Using this system will remove the ambiguity of the question, "how are you doing, bro?" . It will help us know where we really are spiritually. It will help us follow through on our desire to be righteous. Using this system of "righteous stats" we'll be able to describe with greater detail how we're *really doing* in our relationship with God. We can even break righteousness down into different categories such as benevolence, evangelism, prayer, bible study and sacrificial living. Oh and by the way, this system isn't arbitrary because, well, I don't really feel that its arbitrary.

Long Term Effects

I believe very strongly that the system we have created fundamentally distorts Christianity and as a result, it damages peoples relationship with God. It changes it from a relationship

based on grace where you're motivated by God's love for you and you're secure in his love to a relationship that's based on performance and results. Subsequently, people live in constant guilt (if their numbers are low) and fear that God somehow loves them less or will ultimately "saw them off the vine" if their "production" doesn't improve. This system takes away peace and turns it into fear.

I believe this system does the following:

- a. It distorts your view of God by misrepresenting His character
- b. It distorts your view of your relationship with God by undermining your confidence in your salvation
- c. It distorts your relationships with others, especially those you disciple
- d. It distorts your motivation for doing the right thing

Stats and the Character of God

It is not evident at first, but over time this entire system guts Christianity of its most important aspect: that God loves us and accepts us unconditionally. I have seen countless people get baptized and joyfully set out to live their lives in obedience to God. Slowly but surely, the joy dissipates. They sit through endless Wednesday night lessons where the church is rebuked for not measuring up in some way: not having enough visitors, enough studies, enough baptisms. Or the budget isn't being met on a consistent basis or people aren't having their discipling times. These people who were once joyful, happy Christians are now somber and guilt ridden. They responded to the gospel with joy only to be crushed by the weight of endless demands for performance. They come to feel that no matter how hard they try they will simply never measure up.

These people no longer see God as a kind, loving merciful father who loves them more than could ever be understood. God becomes, in their mind, a harsh and demanding taskmaster who is ready to yank away their salvation if they fail to produce the right amount of results (visitors, baptisms, contribution etc.). They develop the idea that God's love for them is based on their performance so they feel that they have to constantly earn His love.

Is this the way we love our own children? Do we demand results from them? Do we threaten to throw them out of the house if they don't produce measurable results? Do

we love them based on how many times they obey us? Do we count how many times they obey and punish them if they don't meet pre-determined "obedience goals"? Do we want them living in fear that if they don't measure up we won't love them? May God help us if treat our children in this way. Yet this is exactly the way we teach that God loves us.

I believe our church has developed a schizophrenic, Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde personality. On the one hand we preach about how awesome it is to be a Christian, how great the relationships are, how much God loves us, and how amazing His grace is. Yet, like a ravenous horde of termites who silently eat away at the foundation of a house, this system completely undermines every good thing we teach.

We don't see the double minded, contradictory nature of our whole approach: one minute we're preaching God's love, the next minute we're instilling fear and guilt for not measuring up or producing enough results. More importantly, we don't see how this approach confuses people and damages their relationship with God.

I have noticed a certain pattern that repeats itself almost every year which perfectly illustrates the problems with basing your standing before God on numerical results. This pattern is often seen at the beginning of the year because December is typically a slow month for visitors, studies and baptisms. Here's how it works:

First, the Zone Leader gathers everyone together and rebukes them for the low numbers. He tells everyone that the problem is that laziness and complacency has crept in and the answer is hard work. Evangelism goals are set and people are held accountable in a strict, daily manner. People are told to call their discipler every night with their visitor commitments to church. Sometimes they'll even be told to call in with the number of people they've met that day. The Bible Talk leaders especially are held accountable through stat sheets and leaders meetings.

After a few weeks however nothing really changes. The numbers don't really improve. The Zone Leader then gathers everyone together again. Only this time he blames the low numbers on lack of prayer and not "relying on God." He reads from Galatians about "beginning with human effort" and he rebukes people for their self reliance and lack of prayer. (The truth is they were just doing what they were told to do, but that's another issue.)

With the new emphasis on prayer, the evangelism goals are set aside, replaced by prayer time goals. People are given goals for how long they should be praying and studying. Prayer and fasting chains are set up throughout the zone. Prayer times are set up where people are told to go to their Bible Talk Leaders house at 5:00 am to pray. Anyone who doesn't show up is admonished.

This also proves unsuccessful however in "turning the ministry around." Despite several weeks of heavy emphasis on prayer the numbers still don't change. The Zone Leader then turns to a more drastic measure: root the sin out of the camp! He concludes that the reason the church isn't growing must be that people are hiding sin. The very next midweek service is intense. He preaches a hard line, fire and brimstone lesson about the disgusting sin that is going on in the church. People hang their head in shame as the Zone Leader rebukes them. The men and women separate after the lesson and confess their sins.

After this "rooting out of sin" the Zone Leader is encouraged. He senses that people have really repented of their sin and will now be able to truly be evangelistic. A few weeks go by. Then a few more. Inexplicably, the numbers are not noticeably better. The Zone Leader scratches his head and wonders what could possibly be wrong. Then he realizes it: "my people don't understand grace!"

At the very next midweek service the Zone Leader addresses the church and teaches a lesson about grace. The main point however, is still that his people are at fault. *They* don't understand grace, *they* are running around trying to earn God's acceptance, *they* aren't spiritually mature. He tries to assure people that God really loves them and that the gospel really is good news.

And so, the pattern is complete. Months go by where the church is constantly made to feel inadequate in some way: they're not sharing their faith enough, they're not praying and fasting enough, they're not confessing sin enough, they're not giving enough. People feel burdened and discouraged yet they always blame themselves.

The Zone Leader might even say something along the lines of "if you feel burdened it's because you don't understand God's grace. If you're not joyful, you need to get joyful." (This is an exact quote I heard myself). People hear this and they beat themselves up even more. They feel discouraged to begin with and now they're made to feel bad for feeling bad! The system, the teaching or the leader is never at fault.

For many people, the burden becomes too much. They come to the conclusion that no matter how hard they try or how much they pray, they will simply never be able to truly please God for any length of time. They can't even read their Bibles anymore because it only reminds them of their failures. Where it once brought them peace and comfort to read God's word, now it only brings them fear, guilt and shame. Fear of being condemned to hell, guilt for not measuring up, shame for who they feel they are. How did this happen? How did these once joyful people become so somber and guilt ridden?

I believe that this legalistic, humanistic system is completely to blame. We have become the Pharisees. We tie heavy loads on the shoulders of the Christians and then rebuke them for faltering under the load. Is it any wonder that over 60% of people we baptize leave our churches every year? In his book *Classic Christianity*, Bob George hit the nail right on the head:

“In all my years as a Christian, I have never heard anyone say, ‘I’ve had it! I’ve quit! I’m sick to death of the love and grace of God. I’m sick of other Christians loving and accepting me. I’m giving up this Christian life.’” No, I’ve never heard that. But I couldn’t count the number of Christians I’ve known who have given up because of being under law, who have been broken by the crushing burden of trying to be good enough to earn God’s acceptance, who have been mangled by the competition, the judging, and the demands to conform to some group’s standards.”

In the 1980's Mikhail Gorbachev tried to “reform” the Communist system of the Soviet Union through his policies of “glasnost” (openness) and “perestroika” (restructuring). These changes gave the illusion of improvement but the underlying problems that plagued the Soviet Union remained unchanged. Boris Yeltsin, on the other hand, realized that the system was a hopeless failure and could never be reformed. He saw correctly that the system itself *was* the problem.

I believe that this system we have created is the problem that plagues our churches. I believe it is directly responsible for the staggering number of people who leave our churches each and every year. No efforts to change it or restructure it will succeed. It must be abandoned completely and written off as an utter failure. It hurts people. It burdens them. It discourages them. It misrepresents the character of God. It is wrong.

Stats and Discipling Relationships

Compounding the problem is the revolving door of relationships where the leaders shuffle those around you once or twice a year. You never really build deep relationships with people because it seems that just as you begin to get close to someone the discipling tree changes and you must start building relationships all over again.

Very often, discipling partners are changed after an extended period of low numbers in the church. The change is meant to spur more growth in the church. Many times people who don't even know each other will be paired up as discipling partners. The Bible Talk Leaders and disciplers then sit in Leaders Meetings where they're told that "discipling times shouldn't be spent sitting around talking. They need to be spent by going out and making disciples."

As a result, these new disciplers completely skip over the natural friendship building time that is inherent in all good relationships. They don't feel like they have time for that – in the words of one such discipler: "I don't have time to be your friend." So their relationship with those they disciple revolves entirely around stats: who's coming to church, who are you reaching out to, who can we study with, etc. The relationship is purely artificial. It is a miserable way to live.

Six to eight months later, the discipling changes again. The "disciplee" is now put in another Bible Talk and given another discipler who he really doesn't know. His prior disciplers never call him anymore. These people now feel burdened and isolated. They don't really feel close to anyone. And they leave our churches by the thousands each and every year.

The Performance Treadmill

It's all about performance in our church. Meeting enough people. Having enough visitors. Having enough results. Meeting goals. Do and do and do and do. When the performance is lagging, the unintended message delivered from the pulpit is fear, guilt, and shame. Fear of being sawed off the vine. Guilt for not "living like a disciple." Shame for having such few visitors at church. It never ends. How can you possibly live at peace when you're standing before God is constantly being called into question?

When you're constantly being pushed to meet man-made goals and standards you are doomed to failure because no one ever really measures up. The whole point of the cross is that no one will be made righteous by their actions and that God accepts us by faith. What we have done is communicate the idea that if you're not working hard enough or producing enough results God will reject you.

We have fundamentally distorted the message of Christianity. Ultimately, this system we have created permits you no real, lasting peace. Paul wrote letters to re-assure people of their salvation, not cast them into doubt. We create an environment that demands performance and results. When these results are not met, people feel guilty and doubt their salvation.

Consider some of Jesus' promises:

Matt 11:28-30

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus calls out to those who are weary and burdened and he offers us *rest for our souls*. It is commonly understood that the burden that Jesus was referring to was the burden or yoke that the teachers of the Law had placed on people. Some Bible scholars have even suggested this alternate translation:

"You are troubled by the commands which the teachers of the Law have placed upon you. Come to me; I will remove your burden."

This idea is consistent with Jesus' characterization of the Pharisees:

Matt 23:4

They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

Luke 11:46

Jesus replied, "And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people

down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

Other Bible commentators have noted that the phrase “Take my yoke” was a common Jewish metaphor for discipline and discipleship. "Put your neck under the yoke, and let your soul receive instruction" is a verse from the apocryphal Jewish book of Sirach which deals with the process of gaining wisdom. (Sirach 51:26).

The word translated “rest” is defined as:

to cause or permit one to cease from any movement or labor in order to recover and collect his strength to give rest, refresh

Consider these verses which echo this concept of Jesus coming to bring us peace:

John 14:27

Peace I leave with you; my *peace* I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

John 16:33

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have *peace*. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Acts 10:36

You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of *peace* through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

Rom 5:1

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have *peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

Rom 14:17

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, *peace* and joy in the Holy Spirit,

Rom 15:13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and *peace* as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Eph 6:14-16

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place,¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the *gospel of peace*.

2 Thess 3:16

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

The word for peace (Strong's 1515) in this verse is defined as:

1. a state of national tranquility; exemption from the rage and havoc of war: Rev 6:4
2. peace between individuals, i. e. harmony, concord: Matt 10:34
3. after the Hebrew *shalom*, security, safety, prosperity, felicity, Luke 19:42
4. Specifically, the Messiah's peace: Luke 2:14
5. according to a conception distinctly peculiar to Christianity, the tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and content with its earthly lot, of whatsoever sort that is: Rom 8:6
6. of the blessed state of devout and upright men after death Rom 2:10

Stats and Motivation

The number system distorts your motivation for doing the right thing (especially for sharing your faith) Its not that you want your motivations to be distorted, it just happens. You set out to share your faith because it pleases God and you love people. Yet you're constantly being asked "how many visitors are coming this Sunday?" or "How many studies do you have" by your leaders.

If attendance is low, you'll get a call from your zone leader saying: "we need to make some things happen, yesterday we really stunk it up. We only had x amount of visitors." If you have no studies you're told "you guys need to start some studies this week. You need to get out of this hole you're in." If you had a lot of visitors however, your zone leader praises you.

On the surface there's nothing wrong with any of this. Yet over time you begin to share your faith and set up studies not out of a pure and sincere love for God but rather to please your leaders. You don't want to hear another admonishment about low numbers. You don't want to be rebuked. You don't want to hand in another stat sheet with zeros on it.

With each week that you don't have visitors/studies you feel greater pressure. This pressure does not come from God or your desire to please him. This pressure comes from what you hear from your leaders. You feel compelled to meet the goals they have set for you. You feel confusion inside because you know that sharing your faith is right, yet you feel that somehow something is wrong. There's something artificial and contrived about this whole system yet you know the goal is a good one.

When you have visitors there (finally) or get some studies going, you are praised by your leaders. You didn't hear this praise before but you hear it now. And so the cycle begins: low numbers = guilt and pressure vs. good numbers = praise and confidence.

I find that I have to work *against* this system. I have to fight the feelings of false motivation. This system creates problems and struggles for me that wouldn't be there otherwise. This system does not help me share my faith, it does not help me have a pure, selfless love for the lost; it does not help me grow in my love for God and my knowledge of his will.

I find it almost impossible to keep my motives pure while functioning within this system. What I have done is develop a defense mechanism to fight against it. When I hear leaders talk about numbers and goals I simply throw them out of my head. I basically forget what they're telling me so I won't have the pressure of numbers in my head. I want to share my faith because I love God and not because we need to have 2 for 1 visitors on Sunday.

I've heard all the explanations:

- we need accountability
- numbers go down without the system
- if you're good hearted, you'll understand that numbers represent people
- people are naturally lazy and have to feel some heat.

I cannot accept any of these. The plain, simple truth is that Jesus, the apostles and the early church did not see the need for this system. God does not command us to do it this way. Jesus did not tell his disciples to do things this way. The apostles didn't teach the early Christians to do things this way. Therefore, I can only conclude that:

God does not want this to be done, if He did he would have either given us an example of it being done or he would have specifically commanded us to do it. Therefore, this system is not necessary.

Lets just have some integrity and admit that this system is purely humanistic thinking that we have imported from the world. Do we really believe that God cannot grow his church without man- made accountability systems?

What this system does to people is keep them in a state of perpetual spiritual immaturity. It sends these messages:

- you can't be trusted to do the right thing, so I need you to report in to me every week and tell me what you've done
- without this system, God cannot accomplish his plans in people's lives
- the Holy Spirit is simply not enough to motivate people to love God.

9. AUTHORITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Overview

The word translated as “authority” in the New Testament is the Greek word “exousia.” Depending on its context and usage, the word “exousia” can mean a few things:

- Freedom or right to act
- authority
- ruling or official power

It is used to mean “authority” in many places throughout the New Testament yet it is never used to apply to New Testament leaders. It is used to refer to:

- God
- Jesus
- The Twelve
- Paul
- Civil Rulers

It is used to mean “freedom or right to act” to refer to:

- The Apostles - their right of support
- All Christians - the right to become children of God

Definition

Here is the definition of exousia from Strong’s Dictionary:

Exousia

1) power of choice, liberty of doing as one pleases, permission

2) physical and mental power, the ability or strength with which one is endued, which he either possesses or exercises

3) the power of authority (influence) and of right (privilege)

4) the power of rule or government (the power of him whose will and commands must be submitted to by others and obeyed)

a) universally, authority over mankind

b) specifically,

1) the power of judicial decisions

2) of authority to manage domestic affairs

c) metonymically,

1) a thing subject to authority or rule, jurisdiction

2) one who possesses authority

a) a ruler, a human magistrate

b) the leading and more powerful among created beings superior to man, spiritual potentates

d) a sign of the husband's authority over his wife

the veil with which propriety required a women to cover herself

e) the sign of regal authority, a crown

Perhaps the best way to examine the use of authority in the New Testament (as it relates to church leaders) is to study the apostle Paul.

The Apostle Paul and Authority

His Role and Position

Paul's authority and role came from God. He did not take the position of apostle by his own will or by appointing himself to the role. As Jesus said to Ananias, Paul was to be God's "chosen instrument" in preaching the gospel.

What is an apostle, exactly?

UBS Handbook

"Paul calls himself an apostle of Christ Jesus. The word apostle literally means one who is sent with a message and a mission and who can therefore act on behalf of the sender. This word can be understood in a narrow sense to refer to the first twelve disciples of Jesus. However, in the New Testament it is also used in a wider sense as a general term for Christian missionaries. In his letters Paul uses this term to refer to himself, thus claiming equality with the first disciples of Jesus.

Other ways to translate the term apostle are "a specially sent one of Christ Jesus", "a messenger of Christ Jesus", "a special representative who has been sent out by Christ Jesus", "one who is sent by Christ Jesus to represent him," or even "a person sent with the authority of Christ Jesus" (see the comment below on the word command or "authority").

Acts 9:15

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.

Paul and the Corinthians

1 Cor 2:1-5

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Paul describes the way in which he came to the Corinthians by saying he came in weakness (not as an authority figure lording it over them) and preaching only Jesus (not exalting himself). His own role as an apostle wasn't the point - Paul preached Jesus first and foremost. He didn't add a list of other things that he thought they should do to become Christians, he says he resolved to know nothing except Jesus. His message was exactly what God wanted him to say.

He purposely de-emphasizes his role or stature. He says that he didn't preach with "wise and persuasive words", meaning that he didn't seek to impress them with worldly wisdom or techniques. Instead, his preaching was a demonstration of the Spirit's power. In other words, he was nothing, the power they saw was from God's Holy Spirit working through him. The point of all this? That their faith would not rest on Paul's wisdom!

Think about this carefully. Paul did not want their faith to be based on his wisdom, his ideas, his understanding. He was only the messenger sent from God. You have to ask yourself with all honesty: what is my faith based on? Is it based on one man's understanding of the Bible? Is it based on worldly ideas or viewpoints? Or is it based strictly on the Bible as I have studied it for myself?

In 2 Corinthians Paul repeats this same idea:

2 Cor. 4:5 For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

The word for "servant" here is "doulos" or slave. Paul says that they're not preaching to exalt themselves. He and his companions were not the focus of the message but rather that:

- Jesus is Lord - supreme in authority
- They are their slaves, sent from God to preach Jesus to them and build them up in their faith.

Throughout the letters to the Corinthians, Paul emphasizes that his role is that of a servant and slave, sent from God for their benefit. No one could make the charge that Paul was lording authority over them because Paul lived as a servant, not a ruler:

2 Cor. 10:8

For even if I boast somewhat freely about *the authority the Lord gave us for building you up* rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it.

2 Cor 12:19

Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and *everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.*

2 Cor 13:4

For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet *by God's power we will live with him to serve you.*

2 Cor. 13:10

This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority--*the authority the Lord gave me for building you up*, not for tearing you down.

The phrase translated "building you up" in 2 Cor. 13:10 is the word "oikodome" (Strong's 3619) which is defined as:

- 1) (the act of) building, building up
- 2) metaphorically, edifying, edification; the act of one who promotes another's growth in Christian wisdom, piety, happiness, or holiness
- 3) a building (that is, the thing built, edifice)

Paul makes it very clear in 2 Cor. 1:24 that his authority was given to him for their edification and growth. It's purpose was to help others, not to make his own life easier:

NIV

Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.

NASU

Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm.

Here again, Paul describes his role in terms of helping them and bringing them joy. He draws a contrast between lording it over them and working with them for their joy.

The words “lord it over” in the NIV are a translation of the Greek word *kurieuoo* (Strong's 2961) which is defined like this:

to be lord of, to rule over, have dominion over (see Luke 22:25)

The word "work" is “*sunergos*” (Strong's 4904) which means “a companion in work, a fellow worker.”

Excerpt from the UBS Handbook

2 Cor 1:24

Not that we lord it over your faith: the expression lord it over is somewhat archaic English and may be quite unnatural in the receptor language. It simply means to "dominate" or "act like a boss." And the word faith may be better translated by a verb phrase in many languages. TNT translates straightforwardly "we are not telling you what you must believe." The idea is "we are not bosses who tell you what to believe" or "we are not seeking to impose on you what you must believe.”

We work with you for your joy is literally "we are co-workers of your joy." Most interpreters do not include the readers, that is, the Corinthians, among the "co-workers." RSV and TEV make clear that the subject “we” in “we work” refers to Paul and his associates, although the added with you has the effect of including the Corinthians as co-workers.

Paul defines his role by saying that he's not a lord or a boss or an authority figure over them but simply a fellow worker who brings them joy. This is in perfect agreement with what Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 20:25-28:

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,²⁷

and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Paul put this into practice when he refused to accept material assistance from the Corinthians even though as an apostle, he was entitled to such support. The reason he did this was so that his detractors couldn't say that all he wanted from them was money. Paul's primary objective was to help the Corinthians grow in faith and love, not to make sure his needs were taken care of.

Upon arriving in Corinth, Paul supported himself by making tents. He didn't demand tithes or assistance from the Corinthians.

Acts 18:1-3 After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.² There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them,³ and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.

1 Cor. 9:1

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?

1 Cor 9:11-14

If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?¹² If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?

But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.¹³ Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar?¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.

2 Cor. 11:5-9

But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles."⁶ I may not be

a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way.

⁷ Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? ⁸ I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. ⁹ And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so.

As Paul writes, he "lowered" himself in order to "elevate" them. This is exactly what Jesus wanted his disciples to do, especially those who would assume positions of leadership in His church. Think about this carefully. Paul had first brought the gospel to Corinth. He was an apostle and therefore entitled to their support. Paul had every right to call on the Corinthians to support him. Yet he doesn't. He uses this entire situation to show them that first and foremost he loves them and simply wants them to grow in their faith, joy and love.

2 Cor. 12:14-15

Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. ¹⁵ So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?

What an amazing spirit of humility and service Paul had. He tells them that he would gladly spend everything he had for *them*. Paul turned the tables around on them. He's saying to them that "I do not want your money or possessions, in fact I will spend what I have to give to you!" He likens himself to a parent and the Corinthians as his children. This excerpt is from the NIV Encyclopedia of Bible Words:

"Paul had no need to resort to manipulation or coercion, because Jesus was alive and acting as head of His church. Jesus remained powerful among his people and was free to exercise His authority in disciplining ways. Paul relied on Jesus to bring about a response to the words that He, Jesus, had given Paul to speak to the Corinthians"

Paul and the Thessalonians

Let's take a look at what Paul told the Thessalonians:

1 Thes. 2:6-12

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you,⁷ but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.⁸ We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.⁹ Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

¹⁰ You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.¹¹ For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children,¹² encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

As apostles they could have been a burden to the Thessalonians by demanding support from them. Instead of doing that however, they endured "toil and hardship" in taking care of themselves. He tells them that they had "become so dear" to him and that's why they chose to work instead of to be supported. He describes their apostleship in these terms:

1) gentle, like a mother caring for her little children

This gentleness was shown by the way Paul and his companions worked day and night to avoid burdening them in any way. The implication here is that they did not receive any kind of financial or material support from the Thessalonians. As a result, they had to work "regular jobs" to provide for themselves.

Incidentally, this verse also shows that Paul did not expect Christians to tithe to support the apostles. If God expected for Christians to tithe, there would have been no reason for Paul to have had to make tents to support himself. All he would have had to do was say "you need to tithe 10% or more to support me and my companions." Yet he didn't mention tithing in any way.

2) They dealt with them "as a father deals with his own children"

What kind of father were they? Paul says that their role was:

- encouraging,
- comforting and
- urging them to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

As he did with the Corinthians, Paul put the needs and spiritual growth of the Thessalonians over his own needs. He worked day and night so as not to burden them. He was gentle with them, he encouraged and comforted them, he urged them to live lives worthy of God.

Paul and the Philippians

We know that when Paul was in Thessalonica, he received support from the Philippians:

Phil 4:14-19

Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. ¹⁵ Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, *not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only*; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. ¹⁷ Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. ¹⁸ I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

Paul had been to numerous cities and yet *only* the Philippians sent him assistance up to that point. He says they sent him "aid again and again." Paul simply refers to what they sent as "gifts." It is interesting to note that Paul had been to many churches before he got to Phillipi yet none of these churches sent him any support. These are places Paul preached in before he got to Phillipi:

Acts 15:41

He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Acts 16:6

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.

Acts 16:1,4

He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. ⁴ As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey.

Paul did not demand that these other churches should send him tithes to support him. There is no evidence that he considered these churches to be in sin because they didn't provide for his needs. Furthermore, there is no indication that he commanded the Philippians to give to him to provide for his needs. It seems that their support was a free will offering given purely out of the grateful overflow of their heart.

Regarding his purpose in living and in his ministry Paul wrote:

Philip. 1:25

Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and *I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith,* ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

He told the Corinthians that he worked with them for their joy, he told the Thessalonians that he encouraged, comforted and urged them to live Godly lives. Here he tells the Philippians that he would continue living so that they would grow in their faith and joy. This is New Testament leadership.

What Paul Commanded

There are several Greek words which are usually translated as "command" or "commandment" in the NIV.

These are the main words for "command":

- 1) epitage-2003
an injunction, a mandate, a command

- 2) paraggello-3853
 - a) to transmit a message along from one to another, to declare, to announce
 - b) to command, to order, to charge

These are the words usually translated as "commandment"

- 1) paraggelia-3852
 - a) announcement, a proclaiming or a giving a message to
 - b) a charge, a command

- 2) entole-1785
 - a) an order, a command, a charge, a precept, an injunction what is prescribed to one by reason of his office
 - b) a commandment; a prescribed rule in accordance with which a thing is done
 - i) a precept relating to lineage, of the Mosaic precept concerning the priesthood
 - ii) ethically used of the commandments in the Mosaic law or Jewish tradition

Commands and Opinions

In dealing with the question of marriage in 1 Cor 7, Paul makes a distinction between commands from God and his own opinions.

1 Cor. 7:6

I say this as a concession, not as a command [epitage].

1 Cor. 7:25

Now about virgins: I have no command [epitage] from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

The word translated as "judgment" is this:

gnome-1106

- 1) the faculty of knowledge, mind, reason
- 2) what is thought or known, one's mind
 - a) view, judgment, opinion
 - b) mind concerning what ought to be done
 - 1) by oneself: resolve purpose, intention
 - 2) by others: judgment, advice
 - 3) decree

Other versions translate this word as "opinion":

NAS

Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an *opinion* as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.

RSV

Now concerning the unmarried, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my *opinion* as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

Paul makes a clear distinction between his opinion or judgment, and a command of God. The context of this passage is marriage and whether or not people should get married given the current situation or the "present crisis." He tells them that it is up to them to make up their mind for themselves. He covers both options:

1 Cor 7:36 If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is

engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married.

The decision to marry is up to the individual. Paul gives his opinion that people should remain single so that they can dedicate themselves to the Lord. However, he doesn't make it a rule for them to follow. He is trying to convey a deeper concept to them - that our service to God should be undivided.

1 Cor 7:35 am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

However, he gives people the freedom to make their own decision about the matter. He says that if you want to get married you are not sinning even though you're not taking his advice or following his opinion.

As far as the man who doesn't want to get married, Paul says:

1 Cor 7:37 But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin-this man also does the right thing.

Paul says that the criteria is this:

1. has settled the matter in his own mind - that is, he has reached his *own* conclusion.
2. is not acting under any kind of compulsion or pressure - he must have control over his own will.
3. has made up his mind

This is very interesting. It's almost as if Paul is saying that if you decide *not* to get married, it must be because that is *your* own conviction, not because you're under pressure from him.

He doesn't say, "you have to trust me, I'm an apostle", he also doesn't preach to them about the wisdom of following advice. He tells them that the criteria is that they settle the matter in their own mind and that they act out of their own conviction, not out of pressure or

compulsion. He gives them his opinion because he loves them and he considers himself trustworthy but he trusts them to make the right decision. Furthermore, the issue to him is not black and white. He says that one option is "right" while the other one is "better."

1 Cor 7:38 So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better.

Earlier in this chapter, Paul makes it clear where he expects his direction to be followed:

1 Cor 7:17 Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches.

The word for "rule" is:

diatasso--1299

to arrange, to appoint, to ordain, to prescribe, to give order

Excerpt from the UBS Handbook

This is my rule... : the Greek is literally "and this in all the churches I commanded" (TEV "teach"). This same verb is used in 1 Cor 11:34 where it is translated "give directions" (TEV "settle"). It may mean "set in order" but more probably has the meaning "command" or "lay down."

1 Cor 11:33-34 So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. ³⁴If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions.

By the authority and inspiration God had given him, he was able to give them direction that was more than just his opinion. He makes it clear however what was opinion and what was his "rule" that Christians were expected to follow.

Commanding or Encouraging?

The passages in 2 Cor 7 and 8 as well as the entire book of Philemon are excellent examples of the way Paul motivated people to do the right thing without invoking his authority as an apostle.

2 Cor. 8:8

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.

This verse especially, makes it difficult to conclude that Paul taught that tithing was necessary for Christians. The issue at hand is the contribution for the poor in Jerusalem. Paul says that he is not issuing a command to them that they *must* give. Rather than simply issuing a command (which he could have done since he was an apostle) he inspires them by comparing the generosity and unselfishness of other churches.

The reason he doesn't just command them to give is because he wants to see is how "sincere" or genuine their love really is. If Paul gave them a command, it would be very difficult to tell what the motivation was for giving. After all, people can give just to comply with the request of a leader and still have greed and selfishness in their hearts.

What he wanted was for them to give out of sincerity and a genuine concern for others. He didn't want forced compliance but rather willing cooperation. The word translated "sincere" is:

gnesios (Strong's 1103)

- 1) legitimately born, not spurious
- 2) true, genuine, sincere

He doesn't want them to give out of pressure from him. He wants it to be because it is truly in their hearts to give. The direct implication of what he's saying is that simply issuing commands is not necessarily the best way to get Christians to do the right thing.

Consider what he told Philemon:

Philem 8-10

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do,⁹ yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul-an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus-¹⁰ I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.

The word for "order" is epitasso (Strong's 2004) which means:

to enjoin upon, to order, to command, to charge

The word for "appeal" is parakaleo (Strong's 3870) which is defined as:

- 1) to call to one's side, to call for, to summon
- 2) to address, to speak to, (call to, call upon), which may be done in the way of exhortation, entreaty, comfort, instruction, etc.
 - a) to admonish, to exhort
 - b) to beg, to entreat, to beseech, to strive to appease by entreaty
 - c) to console, to encourage and strengthen by consolation, to comfort, to receive consolation, to be comforted
 - d) to encourage, to strengthen
 - e) exhorting and comforting and encouraging
to instruct, to teach

Paul contrasts what he could do as an apostle ("I could be bold and order you") with what he is actually going to do ("appeal to you on the basis of love"). This love is both what Paul feels for Onesimus and what he feels for Philemon. He is appealing to him as a dear friend to do what he asks.

Philem 12-15

I am sending him-who is my very heart-back to you.¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.

The word for "not forced" is:

Anagke (Strong's 318)

- 1) necessity, imposed either by the circumstances, or by law of duty regarding to one's advantage, custom, argument
- 2) calamity, distress, straits

This is the same word translated as "compulsion" in 2 Cor 9:7 (dealing with giving) and 1 Cor 7:37 (dealing with marriage). Just as Paul doesn't want the Corinthians giving under compulsion from him, he doesn't want Philemon to act under compulsion or because he was "forced" by a command. What he wants is sincerity - people acting because they want to, because God has moved them to act a certain way.

Philem 21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

Finally, Paul tells Philemon that he is confident that he will do the right thing. In a subtle but encouraging way, he makes it clear that he wants Philemon to obey what he asks.

What is so important for us however is the way in which Paul delivers his message to both the Corinthians and to Philemon. In dealing with marriage, giving and welcoming back a runaway slave (matters which are not directly addressed in Scripture) Paul doesn't seek to create a "system" for them to follow, he doesn't manipulate them through fear and intimidation, he doesn't invoke his authority as a leader and tell them that they must obey him or they would be rebelling against God.

He expresses his love for them, he teaches fundamental principles and he trusts them to come to the right conclusions. He doesn't coerce people into doing what he wants, he addresses their hearts.

Delegating Authority to Others

Paul often issued commands to Timothy and Titus regarding what they should teach and how they should live. The questions for us are:

- exactly what kind of authority did Paul delegate to these men?

- how does the authority given to them from Paul translate to the authority of today's church leaders?

Let's take a close look at all the passages where Paul gave them commands.

1 Tim. 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command [epitage] of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,

Excerpt from UBS Handbook

The word translated command (TEV "order") is "epitage" and can refer to the right or authority to issue an order (as in Titus 2:15, "authority"); in the present context, however, it refers to a mandate or an injunction that must be obeyed. The Greek term is used of commands from kings and from gods.

This first clause may therefore be translated as "From Paul, a sent one (apostle) from Christ Jesus, whom God . . . commanded to . . .," or one may combine the idea of "authority" with the role of apostle above and translate "From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the authority of God our [inclusive] Savior and Christ Jesus in whom we hope (trust)," or even "From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, whom God our [inclusive] Savior and Christ Jesus in whom we trust have commissioned to . . ."

Another place the word "epitage" appears is in Titus:

Titus 2:15 These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority [epitage]. Do not let anyone despise you.

In the passage in Timothy however, the focus is on Paul. He says that he is an apostle by the command of God, therefore, his authority comes from God Himself.

In Titus 2:15, the focus is on Titus' authority as a pastor and a church leader. The implication is that the commands Paul gives Titus are directly from God, therefore when Titus teaches he should do so confidently, knowing the source of the commands.

So what have I concluded about the authority Paul gave to Timothy? A few observations:

Yes, Paul gave authority to Timothy. But this authority was clearly defined and limited. You cannot extract the concept of authority from its context and say “leaders have authority.” The authority given to Timothy was to teach the specific things Paul mentions.

Timothy was not given a blank check to speak where Paul was silent and then demand that the Christians obey him because of his position. In fact, Paul goes to great lengths to tell Timothy exactly what he should be teaching so that there would be no need to add new doctrines or ideas. As these verses demonstrate, Timothy’s authority was to teach “these things” that he received from Paul.

1 Tim 4:6-7

If you point *these things* out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed.

1 Tim 4:11

Command and teach *these things*.

2 Tim 2:14

Keep reminding them of *these things*. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen.

2 Tim 1:13-14

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you-guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

10. FRUIT IN JOHN 15

Of all the passages we refer to most, perhaps John 15 is the most quoted when it comes to the topic of “fruit.” We teach that “bearing fruit” means making disciples. Let’s examine this passage in detail to see what we can learn:

John 15:1-17 (NIV)

¹“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

⁹“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit-fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other.

Verse by Verse Commentary

Verse 1: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.

Verse 5: "I am the vine; you are the branches.

The question is then, what does Jesus mean by "fruit" in this passage? What we know for certain is this:

The true vine	=	Jesus
The gardener	=	God
The branches	=	Believers
Fruit	=	?

Verse 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

If a believer doesn't bear fruit, God will cut him off. Those believers that do bear fruit will be "pruned" or cleaned by God so that they can produce more fruit.

The word translated as "prunes" is:

kathairo--2508
to cleanse of filth, impurity, etc.

- a) to prune trees and vines from useless shoots
- b) metaphorically, to cleanse from guilt, to expiate

In speaking directly to his disciples, he tells them that because of the words he has spoken to them, they are in fact already clean:

Verse 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

The word translated as "clean" is:

katharos--2513

clean, pure

- a) physically:
 - 1) purified by fire
 - 2) in a similitude, like a vine cleansed by pruning and so fitted to bear fruit

- b) in a Levitical sense: clean, the use of which is not forbidden, imparts no uncleanness

- c) ethically:
 - 1) free from corrupt desire, from sin and guilt
 - 2) free from every admixture of what is false, sincere genuine
 - 3) blameless, innocent
 - 4) unstained with the guilt of anything

Jesus does not attribute their being clean to anything they had done themselves. Their state of being clean was a result of that which Jesus had spoken to them. The UBS New Testament Commentary suggests an alternate translation:

The passive expression in verse 3 may be transformed into an active one by rendering "What I have said to you has caused you to become clean already" or "My message to you has already caused you to become clean."

Verse 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

This is the first of Jesus' commands in this passage. The key word in this verse is "remain." It is this Greek word:

meno--3306

- 1) to remain, abide
 - a) in reference to place:
 - 1) to sojourn, tarry
 - 2) not to depart
 - a) to continue to be present
 - b) to be held, kept, continually
 - b) in reference to time: to continue to be, not to perish, to last, to endure; used of persons, to survive, live
 - c) in reference to a state or a condition: to remain as one, not to become another or different
- 2) to wait for, to await one

Actually, the concept of remaining in Jesus is the primary teaching of this entire passage. It appears here for the first time but Jesus will re-emphasize it several times. The command for us is to stay united to Jesus, to remain connected to him in the way that a branch is connected to a tree. Jesus makes several promises to us if we remain in Him and also warns us of the results of not remaining in Him:

These promises for remaining in Him are:

- Jesus will remain in you - v. 4
- You will bear much fruit - v. 5
- You can ask whatever you wish, and it will be given to you. - v. 7
- God will receive glory - v. 8
- You will demonstrate that you are His disciple - v. 8

The results of not remaining in Jesus are:

- You can't bear fruit by yourself - v. 4
- You can do nothing apart from Jesus - v. 5
- You are cut off from God - v. 2, 6

Verse 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

Jesus likens the disciples to branches. He says that the branch (man) that remains in the vine (Jesus) will bear much fruit. It is important to note that the *branch* represents the believer in this passage, not the fruit of the branch. The command Jesus gave in verse 4 was to "remain in Him." In verse 5 he says "if a man remains in me ... he will bear much fruit."

The word translated as "branch" only appears in this passage. It is not used anywhere else in the New Testament. The word is this:

klema--2814

- 1) a tender and flexible branch
- 2) specifically, the shoot or branch of a vine, a vine sprout

Verse 9 -10 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.
¹⁰ If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.

Here is the second command of the passage, although it closely resembles the first. The command is to specifically remain in Jesus' love. In verse 10 he tells us that we remain in His love by obeying his commands. He also demonstrates the connection between His relationship with His father and His relationship with them.

- He loved them as God loved Him.
- He obeyed His fathers commands and so he has remained in His fathers love.

Essentially, Jesus is telling us that we must obey His commands in order to remain in his love - that is how we remain in Him. That is how we bear much fruit. That is how God is given glory.

Verse 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

Jesus told them all of these things so that they might have his joy. This is a tremendously hopeful verse. Jesus didn't intend these things to be threat to them or to make them fearful of not measuring up. This was not the stern warning of a harsh taskmaster. He wanted to give them His joy and therefore make their joy complete.

Verse 12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

Here is the third command in this passage: love each other in the way that Jesus loved them. Jesus will restate this command in v. 17.

Verses 13-15 Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command.

¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

Here again Jesus is emphasizing the importance of being obedient to his words. He tells us that we are his friends if we do what he commands. Friendship with Jesus then, is based on obedience to His commands. He also tells them that they are now his friends because he has made known to them everything that He learned from God.

Verse 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit-fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.

Jesus lets them know that it was He who chose them, not the other way around. Furthermore, he chose them so that they might "go and bear fruit - fruit that will last." The result of their bearing fruit that will last is that God will give them whatever they ask in Jesus' name.

Finally, Jesus concludes the passage by saying:

Verse 17 This is my command: Love each other.

Analysis

Jesus is using the imagery of a vine to make his point with greater clarity. He's using a figure of speech that would have been immediately recognizable to his listeners. He's saying that he is *like* the vine, believers are *like* the branches and God is *like* the gardener.

Let's think about this in practical terms: a vine has numerous branches attached to it. Those branches can only produce fruit as long as they are still connected to the vine.

The gardener takes care of the vine. He wants it to produce fruit so he prunes it by either cutting off dead branches or trimming the good branches enabling them to grow even more. Once he cuts off the dead branches, they are useless. Now they can't bear fruit, in fact once cut off from the vine they wither away. Eventually the gardener picks them up and throws them into the fire.

The primary commands of this passage:

1) Remain in Jesus

Jesus says this twice:

remain in me - v. 4

remain in my love - v.9

He explains how to do this when he says in v. 10, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love." How then do we remain in his love? By obeying his commands.

2) Love each other

He first tells them how he wants them to love each other:

Love each other as I have loved you - v.12

He wants them to love each other in the way that Jesus loved them. Once again, Jesus provides us with some practical insight into what he means. The standard for loving each other is His love for us. He goes on to illustrate how he loved them by saying in v.13

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

Jesus is referring to his death on the cross with this statement. They would come to understand that very shortly. He is saying that the greatest love you can have is to lay down your life for someone. He will do it for them, whom he now calls "friends." Its almost as if he's saying: "I am your friend. I will show it by laying down my life for you. If you want to be my friend, you can show it by doing what I command. "

Finally, in verse 17 he concludes by simply saying "Love each other."

The whole point of this passage is that Jesus wants us to remain connected to Him in the same way that a branch is connected to a vine. Whether or not we remain in Jesus is based on our obedience to His commands. Either way, if we remain in Him or not, there are certain results we can expect. Lets look at the two possible options:

Remaining in Jesus

- 1) Jesus will remain in you - v.4
- 2) You will bear much fruit - v.5
- 3) God will prune you so that you can be more fruitful - v.2
- 4) Ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you - v.7

Not Remaining in Jesus

- 1) You cannot bear fruit - v.4

- 2) You can't do anything - v.5
- 3) God will cut you off from Him v.2, 6

Jesus makes it clear that bearing fruit is a result of remaining in Him and His love. It is important to note that the primary command for us is not "go and bear fruit", it is "remain in Jesus." This is an important distinction. At the end of this passage, after describing what happens if we remain in Him, Jesus says:

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit-fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.

This command to "go and bear fruit" appears after Jesus had told them to remain in Him and His love. So then, the big question is this: what does fruit refer to here?

We teach that in this passage, fruit is referring to disciples. I do not believe that this is accurate for several reasons. First of all, just look at the immediate context of the passage. The vine represents Jesus and the *branches, not the fruit*, represent believers. Fruit in this context is that which is created within us as a result of remaining in Jesus.

Look closely at verse 6:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit

Here we see Jesus saying "if a man remains in me..... he will bear much fruit." This would indicate that this promise was not only for the disciples he was speaking to but rather for all people for all time. It is a universal promise that anyone who remains in him will bear much fruit.

The idea of believers as branches was also used by Paul in his letter to the Romans:

Rom 11:13-24

I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry ¹⁴ in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection is the

reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.

¹⁷ If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, ¹⁸ do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹ You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." ²⁰ Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

²² Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. ²³ And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴ After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!

In this context, Paul is referring to Gentile believers as the branches that were "grafted into a cultivated olive tree" with the olive tree representing the new spiritual Israel. The Jews, on the other hand, were "broken off because of unbelief."

This imagery of believers as either branches or trees is common in the Scriptures. In Luke 13 Jesus uses the imagery of a fig tree that doesn't produce fruit where the fig tree represents the nation of Israel. Isaiah 5:2 uses the imagery of the vine (as does John 15). In Matthew 21 (The Parable of the Tenants), Jesus uses the vineyard. In this verse in Romans 11, Paul was using a symbol (the olive tree) that was used in the Old Testament:

Jeremiah 11:16

The LORD called you a thriving *olive tree* with fruit beautiful in form.
But with the roar of a mighty storm he will set it on fire,
and its branches will be broken.

Psalm 52:8

But I am like an *olive tree* flourishing in the house of God;
I trust in God's unfailing love for ever and ever.

Secondly, the idea of people being fruit negates the very point that Jesus is making, which is that he wants his believers to remain in him permanently. Fruit simply cannot remain attached to the vine. It either falls off at the end of the season or it is plucked off by the farmers. Fruit can never become a branch either.

Thirdly, this interpretation is Scripturally inconsistent because a believer cannot cause another person to believe, only God can do that.

Consider these verses:

1 Cor 3:5-9

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor.

Paul makes it clear that he and Apollos were only servants who delivered the message. Only God made them grow. This is also demonstrated in many other scriptures which teach that God converts people, not us.

Isaiah 55:10-11

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Isaiah 61:11

For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.

Acts 11:18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Acts 14:27 On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

Acts 16:14 One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

Acts 21:19 Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

Romans 15:18-19 I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done- ¹⁹ by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit.

Col 1:6

All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.

1 Corinthians 1:30

It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God-that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

In each of these verses we see that only God can cause a person to repent and believe. Only

God can bring about a change in a person's heart. We can't. That is not our role as Christians.

Unfortunately, we don't see the inconsistency of our teaching. When we say "if you don't produce fruit (make disciples) God will cut you off" what we're saying is that God will hold *you* accountable for something that only *He* can do.

Another problem with saying that the failure to make disciples will separate you from God is that you cannot control someone else's decision to become a Christian. If you say that not making disciples God will cut you off from Him, you're saying that God will hold you accountable for *other* peoples decisions! That would be saying that your salvation isn't between you and God alone, its between you and other people. If other people don't decide to follow God, its your fault!

So lets put it all together: God will hold *you* accountable for a decision you cannot possibly make and for something you cannot possibly do. This simply doesn't make any sense. How can your salvation be dependent on that which is completely beyond your control?

Consider what Jesus told the disciples:

Matt 11:28-30

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

John 15:11

"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

Paul wrote in Romans:

Rom 8:38-39

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor

depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our teaching on fruit is in direct opposition to these verses. Taken to its logical conclusion it makes absolutely no sense at all, in fact, it is destructive. I have seen this teaching cause Christians to live guilt-ridden, fearful lives because they weren't producing quantifiable, measurable "fruit." This teaching ultimately allows you no peace. It makes your relationship with God a roller coaster ride of ups and downs where you begin to feel that God's love for you is based on your statistical output of conversions.

Let's briefly re-examine some of the Scriptures we looked at earlier regarding being separated from God:

Romans 6:21-23

What **benefit** [fruit] did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the **benefit** [fruit] you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:13-17

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,¹⁴ because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.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, Father."¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.¹⁷ 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.

Galatians 6:7-9

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.⁸ The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap

destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.⁹ Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Ephes. 2:1-5

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world ...³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved.

Col. 1:21-23

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.²² 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--²³ if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.

The point of all of these verses is that it is sinful thoughts and actions, and not specifically the failure to make disciples, that cuts us off from God. You might say: "yes but failure to make disciples is itself a sin." But that's not specifically what these verses are saying. They are referring to sin in *all* its forms.

Failure to convert people is not necessarily a sign of sin on your part. You can share your faith and pray for years at a time and not have anyone decide to become a Christian. It is wrong to always assume that your lack of baptizing people can be somehow traced to sin in your life: hidden sin, laziness or lack of faith. Many of the great men of God in the Old Testament had little to show in the way of numerical results.

Consider the following:

- Noah took just seven other people into the Ark with him despite being a "preacher

of righteousness.” Was the fact that no one listened to him a sign of his lack of faith?

- Moses' failed to lead even a single person into the Promised Land. Was it his fault?
- Jeremiah's preaching failed to bring about repentance and Jerusalem was destroyed.

Lets also consider the rest of the New Testament. If failure to convert people is a sin that will cut you off from God you would think that we would see this teaching reinforced by the Apostles in their letters.

In all of his letters, Paul makes no mention whatsoever of how many conversions had taken place in the churches he was writing to. The letters to the Corinthians are especially important because despite all the sins taking place in that church, you simply do not see Paul making reference to their numerical growth. It is hard to imagine that the church in Corinth was growing in large numbers given their rampant sins. Yet in all the things that Paul rebukes them about you don't see him ever mentioning how much or how little they had grown numerically.

You also don't see him giving numerical goals for Timothy and Titus. You don't see him urging them to make sure that the churches were baptizing a lot of people or else God would cut them off. In the letters to the churches in Revelation, you don't see Jesus making any mention of how much or how little any of these churches had grown.

Conclusion

After my study, I have concluded that our teaching on fruit in John 15 (that fruit refers to disciples) is not supported by the Scriptures. After examining the passage at length, I have concluded that the symbols in John 15:1-17 are these:

The true vine	=	Jesus
The gardener	=	God
The branches	=	Believers
Fruit	=	Righteousness

For the following reasons, I believe that this makes much better Scriptural sense:

1. The context of this passage defines the branches, not the fruit, as believers
2. It contradicts the main point of the passage which is to “remain in Jesus”
3. It contradicts many other Scriptures denoting that the making of disciples is something only God can do.

Our teaching on this issues has been in a state of flux recently. An article appeared in the L.A. Story (the church bulletin of the LA Church) a few years ago where the writer mentioned that “personal fruitfulness” had been redefined. He wrote:

“...we have redefined personal fruitfulness as either ‘planting’ or ‘watering’. Therefore, let me encourage each disciple to not be a dead-end disciple, but to strive to be personally fruitful in one of three ways: One, meet someone who becomes a disciple. Two, study and become best friends with someone who becomes a disciple. Or three, to baptize your child into Christ.”

I believe this teaching is full of problems. First of all, the phrase “personally fruitful” does not appear in the NT. It is an irresponsible misuse of the Scriptures to invent a phrase, make up a definition for that phrase and then act as if both your phrase and its meaning are the correct understanding of a scriptural truth.

Let’s assume that the concept of “personal fruitfulness” is indeed found in Scripture. The

way to find the best possible meaning for this concept is NOT to invent a definition for it. You can't define words or concepts arbitrarily. You must carefully examine the Scriptures by looking up each and every reference to the word or concept and then noting how the biblical author defines it. *We* don't define words - they are defined by their context and usage.

Lets say for the sake of argument that you meet someone who becomes a Christian. According to this new definition you could then say to someone: "I was personally fruitful this year." But according to whom? According to the Scriptures or according to the writer of the article?

The idea of religious leaders making up artificial criteria (and definitions) to meet the righteousness of God is *exactly* what the Pharisees did and Jesus condemned them for it! Their worship was in vain because they were following "rules taught by men." The problem with the rules that the Pharisees had created was that they caused people to miss the true significance and intent of God's commands. People had become more concerned with meeting these man-made rules (and pleasing their leaders) than they were about truly understanding and obeying the will of God.

Secondly, this new re-definition is not what Paul intended to say when he wrote this passage:

1 Cor 3:5-9

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe-as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

The context of this passage has nothing to do with the personal fruitfulness of the Corinthians. This passage is referring to the problem of following one leader over against another. Paul is telling the Corinthians that he and Apollos were not rulers to be exalted but only servants who were faithfully carrying out the work they had been given to do by God.

When Paul writes that he planted and Apollos watered he is discussing the roles that they each played in the spreading and teaching of the Gospel there in Corinth. He doesn't say that these acts of planting and watering constitute "personal fruitfulness." In fact, he says that even though they came to believe through he and Apollos, it was God who made their faith grow. Their faith and their conversion to Christianity were because of God and God alone.

Paul goes so far as to say that neither he who plants or he who waters is *anything*. He refuses to take any kind of credit for their conversion. He doesn't boast, "I was personally fruitful many times while I was in Corinth." He says he is nothing, all he did was carry out the task that God had given him, which was to preach the gospel.

Third, this definition fails to take into account the many references to fruit in the New Testament that refer to growth in righteousness. The writer says that we should "strive to be personally fruitful in one of three ways" so that we won't be a "dead-end disciple." The problem here (and it's a huge problem) is that the Bible does not mention only three ways to be fruitful and it most certainly does not mention his invented definition of being fruitful.

You can be fruitful by replacing sinful actions with righteous actions.

Matt 3:8

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

Acts 26:20

First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

Col 1:10

And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,

You can be fruitful by growing in righteousness of heart and attitude

Gal 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

2 Peter 1:5-9

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness;⁷ and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive (unfruitful) in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁹ But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

The use of the phrase “dead-end disciple” is especially disturbing. This idea that your status before God is based on your ability to produce tangible results is so wrong it is unbelievable. What is so sad to me is that we don’t see the disastrous side effects of this teaching. This teaching guts Christianity of its most precious truth: that God loves us and accepts us unconditionally. It completely misrepresents the character of God. It portrays Him as a demanding taskmaster who will cast you away from Him if you don’t produce specific, quantifiable results and whose love for you is based on your production. This is not the patient, kind, merciful Father described in the Bible who sent his son to die on the cross that we might be reunited with him.

This teaching may well be the reason why so many Christians are always struggling in their faith, never truly growing in their walk with God. This teaching is surely a factor in why so many people leave our churches every single year. These people study the Bible with us and discover the love of God only to discover later that this god they serve is harsh, demanding and never satisfied. A god whose “love” is strictly conditional. They live in constant fear that they will be cut off from him because they’re not producing results. This teaching allows you no rest or peace of mind. It is based on the idea that God has a “what have you done for me lately” mentality. This teaching portrays God as saying “I’ll love you if you produce results, otherwise you’re just a dead-end.”

Is this the way we love our own children? Do we demand results from them or threaten to throw them out of the house if they don't produce measurable results? Do we love them based on how many times they obey us? Do we count how many times they obey and punish them if they don't meet pre-determined "obedience goals"? Do we want them living in fear that if they don't measure up we won't love them? May God help us if treat our children in this way. Yet this is exactly the way we teach that God loves us.

Finally, I believe that our central teaching on fruit is wrong. It is both a distortion and mishandling of the Scriptures and it must be changed.

Hosea 10:12

Sow for yourselves righteousness,
reap the fruit of unfailing love,
and break up your unplowed ground;
for it is time to seek the LORD,
until he comes
and showers righteousness on you.

11. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

A Climate of Fear

I have noticed a certain “mode of thinking” among leaders and non-leaders alike (although it is usually seen in mid-level leaders) that will never question or criticize any teaching or practice handed down from the lead evangelist or higher level leader.

This mode of thinking typically goes like this: God personally chose everyone who is in a leadership position. As we would say “God put them there for a reason.” As such, God leads his people through these leaders. If something we are doing (or teaching) is wrong, God would make it clear to these leaders. Therefore, if they don’t have a problem with something, or if they don’t say that something is wrong, then we should just conclude that it is acceptable to God. In other words, if its o.k. with them it ought to be o.k. with us.

The thinking is basically that you just have to trust your leaders decisions. People in this mode of thinking will never say that something is wrong. They will support their leaders in *every* decision or teaching. If they hear a comment about a leader that is not praise (or is even slightly critical), they will view it as an attack on the leader or as being negative, unsupportive and critical. These people will never say that something is bad or “not good.” Every single teaching or practice is supported or praised without question.

In most cases I would say that these people mean well. They truly want to make their leaders lives a joy and not a burden (Heb 13:17). They’re good soldiers who truly want to be supportive. You cannot fault them for this. They want to be respectful to their leaders and they genuinely love them and believe in them. This is not a bad thing in and of itself

It becomes a bad thing however, when people no longer examine what they’re taught to see if it is true. They simply say “hey, our leaders teach it and so I have to get behind it.” This is precisely how the Catholic church became what it is. People reached the point where they said in effect: “God is only speaking through the leaders, NOT through me. Therefore they’re going to know better than me about what God’s will is for the church.” Once you reach this point there is no longer any barrier to keep the leaders from leading the entire church astray. The leaders will make a decision - any decision - and people will follow! No one asks “hey, should we be doing this?” or “where is this in the Scriptures?”

This is exactly what we teach people not to do yet we do it ourselves. When we study the Bible with people we tell them: “you’ve got to *question* your religious leaders.” We’re referring to questioning the leaders of their current church. Once they get baptized however, we tell our members “you’ve got to *trust* your leaders” This is the classic definition of the double standard. It is holding yourself to a different standard than everyone else.

I believe that these people simply do not realize that it is possible to disagree with something (or someone) and not be critical. They are strictly black and white thinkers. In their minds either someone is being supportive or he’s being critical. The only way to be supportive is to praise and agree. Anything that is not either praise or agreement is therefore critical.

I used to think this way myself. I remember a ministry leader telling me about an open disagreement she had at a staff meeting with a world sector leader. I was shocked that she did this. I genuinely believed that you shouldn’t disagree with your leaders in any way, shape or form. I honestly did not think disagreement was an option.

A few years ago a high level leader in my congregation made some highly inappropriate and offensive comments at an all church devotional. Nevertheless, there were people in the congregation who completely supported him! People were openly surprised when I told them that after the service that one of the evangelists pulled this leader aside and told him “you can’t say those things.”

This leader apologized for his comments a week later yet people’s reaction was simply: “wow, what humility he has! To apologize in front of the whole congregation!” Its as if they had to praise him so as to sweep what happened under the rug. No one dared say openly before the apology that what this leader had said was wrong.

The result of this mode of thinking is that truth becomes relative. It becomes whatever the leaders say it is. I have seen numerous times over the past 14 years where the leaders changed their mind about a given doctrine or practice and the people simply abandoned their prior belief to accommodate what the leaders told them. Here are some examples:

Examples of changes in church practices

Example 1

The church changes leaders and Bible Talks every three to six months. The “official” teaching from the leaders is “change is good, it keeps everyone on their toes.”

No one goes any deeper than that. A simple, shallow saying is all they need. When someone says to them “I don’t know if all this change is a good thing”, all they say is “change is good, it keeps everyone on their toes.” They repeat it like a mantra. They never ask “why is it good?” or what the heck does it mean to be “on your toes”? Their thought process goes about a centimeter deep.

When the leaders come out and say “we’ve hurt the church by all this change”, these people turn around and say “yeah, we really did change too much.” No one says “hey I though change was good and it kept everyone on their toes.” No one takes a stand and holds to their earlier statements.

Why don’t they? Because they don’t have a deep conviction, actually, they don’t have *any* conviction at all. They don’t believe what they believe because they’re convinced it’s in the scriptures. They believe it because it’s what their leaders have taught them. How do I know this? Because they will abandon previously held beliefs at the drop of a hat if their leaders tell them to. They have abdicated the decision-making process (or the truth-seeking process) to the leaders.

The central point here is that people don’t have their own beliefs. They simply adopt the beliefs of their leaders. They cannot say that they’ve reached their conclusions after hours of careful bible study and prayer.

Example 2

The LA Church practice of asking every single person who comes to church to study the Bible.

When an elder from L.A. first taught this at my congregation, people were unanimous in

their praise for this idea. People talked about how it would help them focus on studies, how it would prevent people from "falling through the cracks" and on and on.

Recently, after years of this practice, the leader of the church came out and said "you know, asking someone who came to church to study without even attempting to build a friendship is just weird." You know what the response of people was? It was this: "wow, that's really true. It really is weird to just ask people to study after their first visit."

Example 3

We need to get visitors to Bible Talk. It's a better way to introduce people to Christianity than going to a Sunday service. People walk around and teach this like its gospel.

Then the leaders said "people can only do one thing well. Lets just focus on getting people to church on Sunday". People then turn around and say, "yeah, it really is better to get people to church instead of Bible Talk."

I'm not saying that we can't change our mind about something. What I'm saying is that people do not question anything. They will accept whatever the party line is. What I'm saying is that this is dangerous. Its dangerous for leaders because it leads to unchecked power. Its dangerous for non leaders because it allows them to follow error without even knowing it.

Examples of changes in church doctrine

Example 1 - Authority

Before 1988 or so w used to teach that you had to obey your leaders in all areas, even in areas of opinion. One leader changed his mind about this, and as a result the entire church did also. No on stood up and said, "hey I don't agree with this", they just did a 180 degree turn and accepted what was taught.

Example 2 - Baptism and Discipleship

In late 1987 the leaders began to teach that you had to be a disciple *before* you got baptized. This led to our making people do all kind of things before we would let them

get baptized. We would ask them things like: "Did you have your quiet time every day this week? No? Well then you're not ready to get baptized."

No one stood up and pointed out that the church in the book of Acts didn't make people do all these things before they could get baptized. No one objected to this change, at least not publicly. People were re-baptized by the hundreds because of this teaching.

Then this teaching was quietly changed. Instead of telling people that they had to be a disciple before they got baptized, we began to teach that people just had to make the *decision* to be a disciple in order to get baptized.

Just like that, the old teaching was dropped. It needed to be dropped because it was completely wrong. Yet it illustrates that people will change their views on vitally important issues simply because of what they hear taught from the pulpit.

Example 3 - Personal Fruit

When the leader of the movement went around teaching that personal fruit was only when you had actually met the person who got converted, everyone agreed with him. When he changed his mind about it, the entire church did as well. It's not even like his original definition was even based on a Scripture and yet he rebuked leaders two years in a row for the sins of faithlessness, cowardice and laziness because they had not been fruitful according to his first definition.

That's how far we've taken things - we'll believe what he teaches just because *he* is the one who is teaching it. No one stood up and said "uh, exactly where is this definition of personal fruit in the Bible? Oh, and by the way, where does the phrase 'personal fruit' even appear in the Bible?" No one questions anything. And so when he changed his mind about it, the whole church did as well.

Example 4 - the mainline churches

Prior to around 1987 we accepted the mainline churches as our brothers. Around this time, the author of RtR came up with the idea of "remnant theology" whereby we were the remnant that God was calling out of Christianity. Since he decided that we were the remnant, the mainline churches were suddenly considered lost and we rejected them as

our brothers. Once he decided they weren't Christians the entire church decided that also.

Example 5 - Tithing

When the idea of tithing was first introduced around 1992, the church was told that this was a "guideline" for giving so that there might be equality. We were specifically taught that the NT did not teach tithing. At some point, he changed his mind about this and started teaching that the NT did in fact teach that Christians had to tithe. Once again, the entire church switched its belief on a subject simply because their leaders did.

Analysis

Why does this situation exist? Why are some people automatic in their acceptance of church teaching? Is there a deeper cause and effect that we don't see? I believe this situation exists for two primary reasons.

First of all, the bible knowledge of the average Christian goes no deeper than what they hear from the pulpit and what they've learned in First Principles. They are largely unaware of the principles of biblical interpretation, in fact, they don't even know that such principles exist. As a result, most people are completely ill equipped to properly handle the scriptures.

We don't teach people how to understand the Scriptures beyond the basics. In my 15 years in the movement I cannot remember ever hearing a single class taught on biblical interpretation. As a result, people simply do not know if what they're being taught is correct doctrine or not. They have no way of measuring the biblical accuracy of what is taught from the pulpit. They can't tell irresponsible interpretation from correct interpretation. The result is that they simply accept everything without question. This is dangerous.

Secondly, I believe that many people are afraid. They're afraid to question what is taught, they're afraid to voice disapproval of a leaders decision. They are afraid to say what they really think and feel. Why?

I believe they are afraid of several things:

1. They are afraid of being rebuked.

This is the short term fear. They are afraid of their leader telling them “brother, you’ve got a critical spirit. Your heart is not right.”

2. They’re afraid of losing the approval of their leader.

It is basic human nature to want the approval of those you look up to. If you don’t have that approval you don’t feel good about yourself. It is why a child always wants a parent to see that he did something well. What the leaders think is tremendously, in fact disproportionately, important. In our lingo, we simply call this people-pleasing. We explain this away by saying that if someone is afraid of what the leaders think then they’re just a people pleaser. However, instead of blaming people, we need to acknowledge that we have created an environment where people are afraid.

People feel a basic need to be accepted. This is especially true when you’re talking about people whose faith is weak and who have low self esteem. You can’t just blame people for the problem and say that if someone is afraid its because they’re a people pleaser. We must examine the environment that we have created and see how it is contributing to the problem.

The Bible teaches us that we are responsible for what we teach. I also believe that we are responsible for the climate or environment that we create. Consider the following:

- Jesus condemned the Pharisees for being blind guides and making their converts into 'sons of hell' – he didn’t blame the people who followed them
- The letter of James 3:1 warns us of the stricter judgment facing leaders.
- Didn't Jesus say that it would be better for someone to have a millstone tied around his neck and be thrown into the sea than for him to lead one of 'these children' astray?

I believe we must examine ourselves first and ask why it is that people are afraid. What is it in the way leadership conducts itself that causes people to feel fear? This must be addressed! You cannot explain away the problem by blaming the fearful.

3. They're afraid of being branded as "weak" or "struggling."

They know that leaders talk about people under them as in "do you know what so and so said? He's got a critical spirit." People don't want to be talked about amongst the leaders.

The bottom line is that what your leaders think of you will have a direct, tangible impact on your life. Its not just a matter of people wanting their leaders to like them. If their leader thinks they have a "bad heart" than the entire tone of their discipling relationships will change. You will have your motivation, character and commitment questioned constantly. You will be viewed with a degree of suspicion and mistrust. Your discipling times become discouraging and disheartening and make you feel even worse after getting together.

Compounding this problem is the fact that someone like this will often be given to someone lower on the discipling chain, which is to say someone with less experience and spiritual maturity. If they're viewed as having a good heart on the other hand, you are given latitude, grace and encouragement. If not, life is not pleasant.

I believe this environment exists because we have created it. We have created an environment of fear that filters down through the discipling chain. One of the ways we create this climate is by actively discouraging any ideas that disagree with the "official" teachings of our church. We openly mock opposing viewpoints by questioning the character and motives of people who disagree. We say things like:

- "if you have a problem with tithing its because there is greed in your heart"
- "if you have a problem with calling in stats and our use of numbers its because you don't want accountability in your life."
- "people who say that fruit in John 15 isn't talking about disciples just don't want to share their faith"

These types of statements have a chilling effect on people. These statements are thought-stopping and dialogue-killing techniques that only intimidate people through fear. After hearing these statements made from the pulpit people no longer feel free to speak up. They don't want to be accused of any of those things the leader mentioned. What they end up doing is keeping any disagreements to themselves.

I don't believe this climate existed in the first century church. Consider these situations:

Acts 11:1-3

The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

The Christians who came from a Jewish background felt that Peter had sinned in going into the house of Gentiles. As a result they "criticized" him. Think about this for a moment. They were not afraid to criticize an apostle! Not just any apostle, but Peter himself, the man who Jesus had given the keys to the kingdom.

I'm not saying it's acceptable to be selfish, negative and harshly critical of leaders. What I'm pointing out is simply the climate of openness and freedom that existed in the first century church. These men were not afraid of Peter. I don't believe they saw him as this spiritual icon who was beyond reproach. I believe that's because Peter was approachable and humble. Note that Peter doesn't rebuke them for being "critical." He doesn't accuse them of being unsupportive and of opposing God. All he does is calmly recount the facts. He doesn't try to intimidate them by fear or guilt. He just tells them the facts.

I have to ask, what would happen if a group of people in our church openly criticized our leaders for doing something that they believed was unscriptural? I believe that they would be soundly rebuked. No such openness is permitted in our fellowship.

Let's examine another encounter that apostles had with believers who disagreed:

Acts 15:1-3

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." ² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

Here we see that some Christians believed that it was still necessary to obey the Law of Moses in order to be saved. We know that many false teachers taught this concept but

here it was being taught by other Christians. Granted, they were wrong in what they were teaching. But notice that Paul and Barnabas didn't simply rebuke them for being unsupportive and divisive. Instead, they entered into "sharp dispute and debate" with them to show them that their views were incorrect. This implies that Paul and Barnabas listened to their views and allowed them to express themselves. There was a genuine dialogue between them. Paul didn't simply teach a sermon from the pulpit and the issue was settled.

Evidently however, Paul and Barnabas were not able to convince the church that they were right because the church appointed them to go see the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about the whole issue.

I think this is amazing. The church didn't simply accept Paul and Barnabas' views about the matter. They weren't convinced about what was true. They wanted a "second opinion", as it were. You don't see Paul rebuking the church for not listening to him or accusing them of being unsupportive. In fact, it was *the church* (or perhaps the elders of the church) who decided that they should consult with the other apostles.

Once again, I think this shows that in the first century church people felt completely free to express different doctrinal views. In fact, they felt free to disagree with even the apostles. What's more, the apostles listened to them and engaged them in a dialogue. They didn't rule by issuing commands and expecting people to simply get in line. Let's follow the story further:

Acts 15:5-7

Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them ..."

Evidently, a meeting was called to allow for these believers to express their views to the apostles and elders there in Jerusalem. Note that they "stood up and said" what they believed. They felt free to openly disagree with other leaders. The climate was one of openness and freedom. People weren't afraid of reprisals or rebukes by the leaders. They weren't afraid of being thought of as unspiritual. And more importantly, the leaders gave them an open forum to express their views. Does this *ever* happen in our church?

After hearing what these men had to say the apostles and elders met “to consider this question.” They didn’t just rebuke these men publicly, they didn’t say “you guys just need to trust Paul, he’s an apostle”, they didn’t cut off communication right there by saying something like “the kingdom isn’t a democracy, God chooses the leaders and you have to get behind them.”

They didn’t do any of those things. Instead, they took the time to consider what these men were saying. It says that only after “much discussion” did Peter get up and address them. This kind of openness only happens when people feel safe and free to discuss what they feel in their hearts.

The heavy handed, almost authoritarian style of leadership that we employ will never allow such openness. Such leadership stems ultimately from insecurity. Peter was secure in his standing before God and in his role. As a result, he was not threatened by allowing others to speak up. This fear exists in the church. You can ignore it all you want. You can blame the people themselves. It won’t go away.

Waging War as the World Does

Matt 5:44

But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you

2 Cor 10:3

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does.

I think there's something very wrong about us lashing back at perceived "enemies." Eight years ago our congregation in Singapore was called a cult by a local newspaper. We responded by suing them. After eight years we won our case when the judge said that we were not in fact a cult. KNN called it a “great victory.”

First of all, I think Jesus meant it to be taken literally when he said "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus lived his own teachings: "When they hurled their insults at him, *he did not retaliate*" (1 Pet 2:23). Did Jesus attempt to sue the Pharisees for slander when they called him “demon possessed” and “raving mad?” By suing that

newspaper in Singapore we were retaliating, the exact opposite approach that Jesus took.

Secondly, how was this any different than the world? Unbelievers sue each other and seek legal recourse when they've been maligned or slandered. Here we are doing the same. It's so worldly, not as in materialistic, but as in doing things the way the world does.

Peter also tells us in 1 Pet 3:16 that our good behavior will make people ashamed of their slander. In other words, if someone slanders you and you repay them with love and kindness (as opposed to litigation) you will make them feel ashamed of treating you badly. This is precisely what the early Christians did. Their refusal to fight back against the Romans and their unshakeable love changed many more lives than any lawsuit ever could. It just makes me sad. That's all I can say.

Another way we wage war as the world does is by using loaded, emotionally manipulative language to describe anyone who disagrees with us or leaves our churches. Some of the terms we use to label people are “critics”, “enemies of the church”, “tools of Satan”, “deceived”, “bitter” or “disgruntled former members.”

In the Restoration through Revolution article, leaders who left the Boston Movement are described in this way:

“A few of these later turned back in bitterness because of the "hard teachings" they could not "accept"...

...Many of these church leaders became our enemies to protect "their churches"—their kingdoms. Other enemies, like Jerry Jones and Jim Condon, were people who “joined up” with the Boston Church because of our dynamic growth, only to realize that we were moving doctrinally away from Church of Christ dogma. The majority of the campus ministry leaders and members of those congregations (including Crossroads) did not "join" us. Some who had quickly "joined up" with us, not realizing the extent of differences in our life and doctrine, in time also opposed us, like Rick Bauer.

It is interesting to me that now these people have "yoked" themselves with deprogrammers, such as Steve Hassan, who is a nonbeliever in Christ, in a Herod/Pilate type relationship. However, *the Holy Spirit led the few good-*

hearted individuals--the remnant --to the Boston churches, especially our first three plantings: Chicago, London and New York.”

Former leaders who left the Boston movement are written off as bitter people who could not truly accept the cost of discipleship. The author also writes that the “good hearted individuals” joined up with us – the clear implication being that anyone who didn’t move to one of our congregations had a bad heart.

The article goes on to deal with people who leave our church:

“Critics have noted that people who leave the church have a tendency to be very bitter. Once more, this should not surprise us. Divorce without bitterness is rare. Likewise, when one walks away from a total commitment to God, away from the most important relationship any human being can have, including marriage, then, there is bound to be confusion, hurt, and a tendency to be bitter and to blame the people in the church, thus justifying one's leaving.”

Notice that people who leave the church are described as “walking away from a total commitment to God” and who attempt to “justify” leaving the church by blaming people. They are also portrayed as bitter people. These statements completely ignore the possibility that some people might leave our church because *we* are teaching incorrect doctrines that they could no longer accept. Or that others might leave because life simply became intolerable under the system we imposed on them.

The incident in Indianapolis in 1994 is described like this:

“A very sad chapter in our history was written in March of this year. Ed Powers, the lead evangelist of the Indianapolis Church of Christ, like Korah, being filled with bitterness and selfish ambition, deceived the entire congregation and caused many to lose their faith and turn away from God.”

Ed Powers is vilified in the harshest possible terms. He is charged with causing people to “turn away from God.” Absolutely no details are given to prove this charge. The main point however, is abundantly clear: Ed Powers was totally wrong and we were totally right. It’s just that simple.

A few months ago an elder in the LA church wrote an article on KNN in which he wrote:

“Even "spiritual pornography" has found its way onto the information superhighway. Instead of building lives for God, enemies of the church and disgruntled former members are uniting to attack the Kingdom and destroy people's faith. They present their "facts" and their "stories" in such a way as to picture the church as an abusive, authoritative, greedy and evil cult. Of course, the danger in reading such material is that only one side is presented in personal stories of hurt, and no way exists to ever learn the other side. And we all know what the wise Solomon said, ‘The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him’(Proverbs 18:17)”

This paragraph is a classic example of the logical fallacy known as “poisoning the well.” For example, if I say about someone “Don’t listen to him; he’s a liar!”, I have poisoned the well against that person. The book *Fallacies and Pitfalls of Language* describes it like this: “having already assured everyone that this individual is a liar, there is nothing that person can possibly do in self-defense, for every attempt will be discredited in advance as a further case of lying. “

This paragraph poisons the well by using pure emotional manipulation through the use of loaded, inflammatory words. First of all, note the use of the phrase “spiritual pornography.” This automatically turns the reader against the material. The people writing these articles on the internet are nothing more than “enemies of the church and disgruntled former members” who rather than serve God, seek to “attack the Kingdom” and “destroy people’s faith.” Do these the words promote clear minded, rational thinking? Or are they intended to provoke fear and anger in the reader’s mind?

The author writes that these people “present their "facts" and their "stories" in such a way as to picture the church as an abusive, authoritative, greedy and evil cult.” Note the use of the quotes around the word facts and stories. The clear implication here is that these people are lying and their accounts cannot be trusted.

Finally he ends by quoting the Proverb: “The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.” The irony of this is just amazing. *Our* leaders are the people who are “first to present their case. ” They present their case to the church constantly.

Yet anytime a person leaves and attempts to question our teaching and doctrine they are instantly written off as a “disgruntled former member” who is probably bitter inside. Their stories on the internet are called “spiritual pornography” and we warn people not to read them lest you be “deceived by Satan.” Doesn’t the scripture apply here as well? Could it be that our positions seem right only because we don’t allow anyone to come forward and question us?

The bottom line is that we as a church are never wrong. The problem is *always* with the individual who leaves. This is so unbelievably arrogant. It is also what totalitarian dictatorships do – anyone who leaves Cuba for example, is called a “worm” who has “betrayed their country.”

What does it say about you when you feel the need to thoroughly discredit anyone who disagrees with your views? It says you are insecure, fearful and afraid.

Reliance on Men

You’re never entirely free to be led by the Spirit in our church. At least not if you want to live in peace. The bottom line is that you are fully expected to take advice from your discipler or leader. If you say the Spirit is leading you in another direction you will more than likely be told to take the advice of your leader anyway. After all, the heart is deceitful, you are often told. If you persist in “going against advice” there will be repercussions in your life. You will be viewed as someone who is prideful and insubmissive and the tone of your discipling will change accordingly.

I have seen firsthand, how this situation distorts people’s ability to think for themselves and really hear the voice of God in their lives. These people live in fear. They’re afraid of making a decision on their own. They’re afraid what their discipler/leaders will think of them.

We seem to think that God’s Spirit primarily works through your discipler, not you. Yet the Scriptures are full of references to the empowering presence of God’s Spirit in our lives:

Rom 8:14

...because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

2 Cor 3:17

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Gal 5:18

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

How can I be led by the Spirit when I don't have the freedom to act on what He shows me? Our way of doing things replaces dependence on the Holy Spirit with dependence on human leaders. It creates a learned helplessness in people. What matters isn't what God shows you, it's what your discipler shows you. If I say "I think the Spirit is leading me to do such and such" and my discipler disagrees, I'm supposed to do what he tells me. And I'm supposed to believe that God will bless this submission.

The implication underneath the "discipleship partner" system is that God's Spirit inside you, the mystery of "Christ in you", is entirely insufficient and inadequate to lead you into righteousness. God's Spirit isn't even capable of leading you to the right spiritual mentor. That's something only the leaders can decide.

The New Testament leaders emphasized the need for Christians to have a personal, direct relationship with God. They did not place themselves in between God and men by assuming the role of arbiters of God's will for people. They stressed the importance of making Jesus the primary guide and Lord of your life. Everything they did in teaching the Word of God or sharing godly counsel, wisdom and advice was as servants whose goal was to build them up their faith. They further stressed the importance of growing in your knowledge and *understanding* of the will of God for your life.

Eph 1:17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, *may give you the Spirit* of wisdom and revelation, *so that you may know him better.*

Phil 1:9-11 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,¹⁰ *so that you may be able to discern what is best* and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ,¹¹ filled with the fruit of

righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ-to the glory and praise of God.

Col 1:9 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and *asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*

Col 2:2 My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ,

1 John 5:20 We know also that the *Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true.* And we are in him who is true-even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

The bottom line for us is that you are supposed to obey and submit to your discipler in every area except if it violates your conscience or if it is unbiblical. How can you possibly grow and mature as a Christian if there is someone “over you” whose opinion overrules anything God’s Spirit might tell you? How does this arrangement help you grow in *your* understanding of God’s will? How does it help you discern what is best if ultimately you are not free to make the final decision? How does this system create true spiritual maturity in Christians?

Consider the way you raise a child. When he is young you make virtually every decision for him. As he grows older, and you teach him character and love for God, your goal is to equip him to be able to make the right decisions later on in life. If you’re still picking your son’s friends when he’s 45 because you think he can’t on his own, you have failed as a parent. If your son feels incapable of making his own decisions because he has learned to depend on you, you have done something terribly wrong.

You never really grow up in the movement. You’re never old enough to make certain decisions for yourself. I now realize just how little voice you have in deciding important matters in your life. I never had a problem with this in the past because I believed you had to just trust the leaders. Yet after studying authority, leadership (particularly Paul) and the role of God’s Spirit, I have concluded that our leadership has assumed a role, power and authority that it has not been given by God.

When it comes to your place in the church, the leaders make the important decisions. You have no say whatsoever in:

- who discipled you
- who you disciple
- how often you get with your discipler
- what Bible Talk you're in or even if you are in a Bible Talk
- who is in your Bible Talk
- what Sector/Zone/Region you're in
- how much your Special Contribution will be
- what the minimum amount of your weekly contribution should be

What I now see as bizarre is that the idea that anyone should make these decisions for themselves is considered sheer heresy. It is scoffed at as if I was proposing complete anarchy. As a result, for the rest of your life the leaders will be making these decisions for you. You may very well be a Christian for forty years – you still can't decide these things for yourself. Only the leaders can make these decisions.

It doesn't stop with those things either. Your life begins to feel so manipulated and artificial because much of what you do comes from what you were told to do as opposed to something you decided to do. You are constantly being told what to do, what to say, how to think, what kind of attitude you need to have, how often to get with someone, what Scripture to show him, what you need to change, what you need to start doing.

It never really ends and you begin to feel like the voice of God gets pushed out of your head. When you sit down to read the Bible its not His voice you hear, its your discipler or zone leader or evangelist.

Ultimately there is no peace or freedom here. The very things that Jesus came to bring us are taken away from you. You're never at peace because your standing before God is constantly being questioned. With the constant emphasis on performance and results, you feel a perpetual insecurity about where you *really* stand before God.

You don't experience freedom because a person is placed in your life who assumes the role that the Holy Spirit should have. The leadership feels completely free to speak where the

Bible is silent and then hold you accountable for following their own opinions and ideas.

I found the following letter written by someone shortly after leaving one of our churches. We need to take a strong dose of humility and ask ourselves why is it that someone would write such a thing. It was written in response to a card that one of our members sent to him asking him if he was willing to come back to church :

“I received your card. Thank you for your kind words and concern. My daughter and I are doing fine and will be fine. Would a prisoner who had just been freed wish to return on his own? If he committed a crime again, indeed the jailer would welcome him with open arms! But he'd have to be a fool to return by choice.

Freedom is a beautiful thing. To do things because you want to and know that it's right is a great feeling! Have you been a "prisoner" so long that you've forgotten that some people are free and love it? People actually volunteer because it makes them feel good in knowing they are serving God and not just because it's their "turn"?

Do you know it's possible to live without guilt of being unworthy? Do you know that you won't come down with a deadly disease because you decide [this city] Church is not right for you? You won't go straight to hell for going to a Christian church down the street!

Telling people they will die, become ill or go to hell is a way of controlling people thru fear. Telling them there is nowhere else better to go makes them completely dependent on the church and makes them feel helpless without the church. Of course everyone needs a church home, but why hold people hostage with fear and helplessness? With no vote or input? These beliefs wreck havoc on one's emotional well being.

The "prison" warden and security guards have become very harsh and demanding. They demanded the prisoners to sing louder and stronger. They ordered the people to look happy and joyful even if they didn't really feel it, then chastised them for being happy when the visitor count was so low!

They tell the people "If you don't like it, you can leave!" even then knowing most people are emotionally "chained" to the church and wouldn't leave even if the "prison" doors were left unlocked all night! So they stay, hoping that God will one day make everything better. Hoping one day the warden and guards will have/receive a new "understanding" on how things should really be, then things will get better.

The family members are urged to confess sins to an older and wiser brother or sister, not knowing that that sibling tells the "parents" everything that child is going thru. Private matters are nonexistent.

But of course, this is an easier process for a child. Teach them while they are young to never make a decision on your own, never trust your own instinct, and talking to God alone about a problem is not enough! You must have input from several disciples to make a good decision! After all, how do the church members know you really talked to God about it? You may be fooling yourself and be listening to Satan instead! Therefore, never trust yourself! These lessons are best learned at an early age for the child to become fully dependent on the church. (I thought we were to be fully dependent on God, but [this city] Church taught me otherwise!).

It's obvious I'll never be back. I see too clearly now. I am free. FREE. Free. F-R-E-E. How ever you write it, it's a beautiful word. I'll not be so careless with my freedom in the future. Best Wishes"

12. EPILOGUE

I don't know exactly when, but somewhere along the line the character and identity of our movement changed. We started as a humble yet zealous group consumed by the burning desire to love and serve God. Somewhere over the course of time however, we lost our humility before God and His word and we began following a different path.

I used to tell people when I studied the Bible with them that we were a church that “just wanted to go by the Bible. If you show us something in the Scriptures that we're not doing we'll change!” I honestly believed that. I don't believe it any longer. I don't believe that we just want to go by the Bible. I don't believe that we have such humility before the Word of God. I just don't believe it.

The following quote describes exactly what I think has happened to our church. It is from a book called *Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees* which describes how the Pharisees couldn't understand who Jesus really was because they were so convinced that they were right:

“Any religious body sincerely searching for truth is a thinking group of people. They study Scripture with an inquiring mind. They are open to examining all of Scripture's teachings from any valid perspective. As they study, they will conduct dialogue among themselves and with others as they seek deeper insights and clearer understandings. Different perspectives will exist within the group itself. These perspectives will be discussed openly and vigorously. There will be obvious, sincere disagreements. However, as long as the whole body knows and acknowledges it is seeking truth, there is no threat to sincere searchers in disagreement. The basic objective of any religious body in this situation is acquiring understanding. The object of study, questioning and discussion-disagreement is to gain a more accurate understanding.

When such a religious body reaches the state that it is convinced it has unquestionably found the truth, a definite transformation begins. The members no longer search for better understandings; they begin defending accepted understandings. Truths which were found crystallize into fixed positions. There is no longer room for differing perspectives. Differing perspectives become

evidence of false doctrine. Any serious disagreement threatens to rupture fellowship. Searching questions, questions which seek honest answers, are regarded as a sign of heresy or of faithlessness.

Those who see flaws in accepted positions are considered dangerous persons who are seeking to lead the faithful astray. No longer is the objective to understand. The group acquires a new objective. The basic objective becomes imposing uniformity on all members. Now one demonstrates faithfulness by accepting approved positions. The group feels threatened by a studying, inquiring mind who continues to search for understanding. The religious body is convinced that its survival is dependent upon binding its accepted interpretations on all within the group. ”

Consider the development of the Catholic church. How did we get from the early Christians being killed for their faith to the Catholic church killing people for their faith. How did the church go from simplicity and power to bureaucracy and legalism?

The seeds of the Catholic church were planted by four distinct developments:

1. In order to find practical solutions to difficult problems and crisis, the church leaders developed an external "system" and then bound that system on all Christians everywhere. They adopted an approach to the Scriptures that can be described as “speaking where the Bible is silent.”
2. The exaltation and veneration of church leaders.
3. The teaching that the opinions and teachings of church leaders is equal in authority to the Word of God.
4. The teaching that only the “Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church” (as it became known) comprised the kingdom of God on earth. In other words, they declared themselves the “one true church.” Those who disagreed with the Pope were declared heretics and deceivers, they were thrown out of the church and were considered to be lost and condemned.

We are simply repeating the mistakes of the past. We now claim the authority to speak where the Bible is silent yet we end up speaking where the Bible has already spoken. In

doing so we have created an elaborate, legalistic system and bound it on every member of our church.

We have exalted one man to a position of power and authority that cannot be found in the Scriptures. We praise this man constantly and lavishly and refer to him as our “founder.” This man’s views, right or wrong, shape the beliefs of our entire church.

We have placed the opinions of human leaders on the same level as the Scriptures themselves. The leaders have assumed a role and authority that the Scriptures have not given them. They are no longer servants and slaves, they are lords who exercise authority.

We have placed ourselves on the judgment seat of God and crowned ourselves as “God’s Modern Day Movement.” Anyone who disagrees with us is “bitter” or “disgruntled” and “really didn’t want to live as a disciple.” We consider them lost and reject them as brothers and sisters.

It is all so clear to me now. I don’t have any deep or profound answers to these issues because I think the solution is quite simple. The structure I have described needs to be completely dismantled: no more stats, no leader of the movement, no exaltation of men. The incorrect teachings must be publicly renounced. Most importantly, arrogance and self righteousness must be replaced with a true humility towards God and His children, where ever they may be.

When you come to the inescapable conclusion that your church’s core doctrines are wrong, there can be no going back. To renounce your new convictions to remain in the safe confines of the fellowship is both cowardly and self defeating. And so, you reach a crossroads: remain silent or speak out.

No religious leader, no man or woman will answer for us on the day of Judgment. We will stand before the throne of Almighty God as individuals and we will give an account for our lives, including what we believed and how we lived. Since no man can answer for us then, no man must think for us now.

Early in his presidency, as the American Civil War crisis grew worse, Abraham Lincoln instinctively realized the historical importance of his role. He understood that his action or inaction would effect millions of people for generations to come. He embraced his role

however, and he sought to enlist the rest of the country in what he called the “eternal struggle between right and wrong”:

“Fellow-citizens, we can not escape history. We of this Congress and this Administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance or insignificance can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down in honor or dishonor to the latest generation. We *say* we are for the Union. The world will not forget that we say this. We know how to save the Union. The world knows we do know how to save it.

We, even we *here*, hold the power and bear the responsibility. In *giving* freedom to the slave we *assure* freedom to the *free*--honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve. We shall nobly save or meanly lose the last best hope of earth. Other means may succeed; this could not fail. The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just--a way which if followed the world will forever applaud and God must forever bless.”

Like Lincoln, we too can make a difference in this world, but only if we have the courage to stand on what is right, and not on what is easiest.

There is still time for our church to recover the spirit and heart that filled the first century church. It can only come by wholeheartedly embracing the Scriptures and trusting that God in His wisdom has given us everything we need for life and godliness – we don’t need to change, add or improve anything. It’s up to us.

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13. BOOKS

These are some of the books I have read or studied over the past two years. Many of them have been invaluable, particularly the books on biblical interpretation.

Biblical Interpretation

Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992

Fee, Gordon D., *New Testament Exegesis*; Revised Edition. Louisville: Westminster Press, 1993

Packer, J.I., *Understanding Scripture*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1977

Bercot, David. *Common Sense*. Tyler TX: Scroll Publishing, 1992

Ketcherside, Carl. *Twisted Scriptures*. St. Louis: Signal Hill Books, 1965

Carson, D.A. *Exegetical Fallacies*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996

Hartill, J. Edwin, *Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1947

Stein, Robert. *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998

Chadwell, David W., *Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees*. Abilene, TX: Quality Publications (ISBN 0-89137-566-X)

Biblical Encyclopedias

Richards, Lawrence O., *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Words*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

New Unger's Bible Dictionary

Greek Dictionaries, Lexicons & Commentaries

Mounce, William. *Basics of Biblical Greek* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993

Black, David A. *Learn to Read New Testament Greek*, Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers 1994

Danker, F., Arndt, W.F., Gingrich, F.W. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and*

Kittel, G. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Abridged)

Vine, W.E. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*

Thayer *New Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

Strong's *Greek-Hebrew Dictionary*

Vincent, M. *Word Studies in the New Testament*

United Bible Society New Testament Commentary (USB Handbook Series)

Early Christians/Church History

Bercot, David. *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up*. Tyler TX: Scroll Publishing, 1989

Holmes, Michael W. (editor), *The Apostolic Fathers* 2nd Edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989

Shelley, Bruce. *Church History in Plain Language*. Word Books 1996

Wilken, Robert. *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. New Haven: Yale University Press 1984

Logic and Reasoning

Weston, Anthony. *A Rulebook for Arguments*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 1992

Engel, Morris S. *Fallacies and Pitfalls of Language*. New York: Dover Press 1994

Resources and Articles on the Web

1. Articles by John Engler, a member of the Denver Church of Christ. These are essential reading:

A New Look at Discipleship

<http://www.barnabasministry.com/study-disc1.html>

Greatness, Exclusivity and the Kingdom of God

<http://www.barnabasministry.com/church-exclusive.html>

2. Executable Outlines - <http://bible.ca/eo/index.html>

This site has excellent Bible studies available for free.

3. Article - "A Pastor's Authority" by Ray C. Stedman

<http://www.pbc.org/dp/stedman/misc/pastorauth.html>