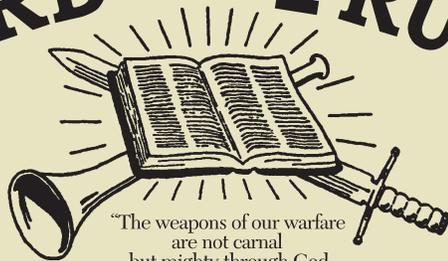


The SWORD and TRUMPET

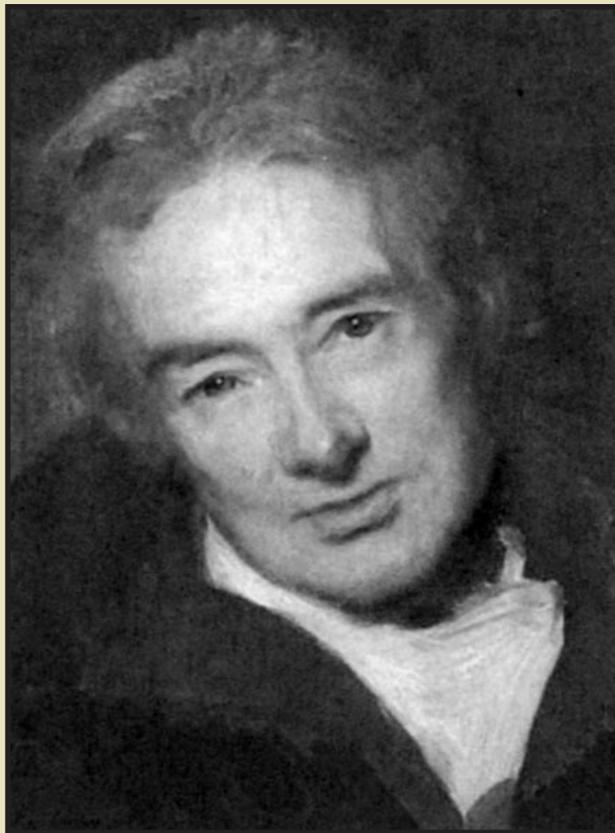


“Blow ye
the Trumpet
and warn
the People.”

“The weapons of our warfare
are not carnal
but mighty through God
to the pulling down of strongholds.”

“Take the Sword
of the Spirit
which is
The Word of God.”

Guidelines



WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

DECEMBER 2005

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SWORD AND TRUMPET GUIDELINES monthly magazine is a faith ministry directed by a Board representing various constituencies of the Mennonite Church. It is committed to defending, proclaiming, and promoting the whole Gospel of our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. It emphasizes neglected truth and contends for “the faith which was once delivered to the saints.” This publication exposes and opposes doctrinal error which compromises that faith and leads to apostasy.

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Person of the Month:

William Wilberforce (1759-1833)

William Wilberforce was born in Hull, Yorkshire, England, August 24, 1759. A son and grandson of wealthy merchants, William could trace his ancestry back to the Saxons. His grandfather was also a respected politician, having served two terms as town mayor.

An intelligent child, Wilberforce received a good grammar school education in the local school where he excelled in the area of public speaking.

When William was only ten years of age, his father died. At the time, his mother was also ill so he was sent to Wimbledon to live with his aunt and uncle who had been converted through the preaching of Evangelist George Whitefield shortly before William's arrival. During this time at his uncle's, Wilberforce came in contact with his aunt's half brother, John Thornton, who was also a devout Christian. Though a very wealthy man, Thornton lived a simple life, giving much of his wealth to the cause of Christ and His Church. Thornton became a mentor to William, giving him a large sum of money and challenging him to put it to work for the cause of Christ in relieving the needs of the poor. Another mentor at this time in William's life was John Newton. The relationship was so close that the childless Newton referred to William as his "son." As a result of Newton's good influence, William was converted and became a Methodist. When news of William's spiritual state reached the ears of his mother and grandfather, they were very unhappy. His grandfather vowed that he would cut William out of his will if he continued along this spiritual path. His mother felt that she must "rescue" him and promptly had him return home two years later at the age of twelve. She thrust young Wilberforce into the social life of the important families of his hometown. As a result, his mother's efforts were "successful," and his spiritual fervor waned. John Newton, however, maintained contact with William and continued to follow his life.

Wilberforce completed his schooling at Pocklington School and then went on to St. John's College, Cambridge. Although William had a good mind, he spent a lot of time in worthless pursuits of high society such as playing cards and gambling. As a result of his activities, he met William Pitt, who would later become the Prime Minister of England. In 1780, while still a young man of twenty, Wilberforce became a Member of the British Parliament. He took his work seriously but did not let that stand in the way of enjoying the social life of London as a charming young bachelor with a quick sense of humor and a good voice for singing. He was much in demand as a dinner guest in the homes of London's rich and famous. *(continued on page 9)*

The Christ of Christmas

by Milton C. Cook

As we look forward to another Christmas season, we ponder who or what will be the center of the season. It is easy to lose sight of the Christ of Christmas in the midst of the worldly celebration of the season. It has become increasingly a secular holiday that revolves around the desires and pleasures of people who have no spiritual interest in the season. The holiday has been taken over by the world as an occasion to satisfy their fleshly desires rather than acknowledge the true message of the coming of Christ.

For many, Christ could be totally eliminated from the holiday, yet they would continue to celebrate as always. They see no connection between Christ and this day. The world around us finds it easy to take over this day for their purposes. This should not be surprising since Satan has ever appeared as an angel of light, a counterfeit. He has no conscience against appearing as anything but what he truly is. If he were to appear in his true form, he would be rejected by the world. However in his false appearance and with his counterfeit claims he is able to persuade men to listen to him. He began his work in the Garden of Eden and he has continued in the same type of work until today. It is no small matter for him to transform the Christmas season from an acknowledgment of God's plan for the salvation of men into a festival of self-indulgence.

Christmas, as usually celebrated, has become a time of partying, presents, intemperance, and indulgence. Christmas, even for Christians, can become a hurried, hurried time spent in preparing large meals, organizing parties, shopping for too many gifts, and becoming too frazzled to enjoy the season. The humility of Christ hardly shines through when there

is a perceived need to outdo others in a show of sharing.

The message of Christmas has two facets. The one facet of Christmas is the love of God shared through the giving of His Only Begotten Son. This shared love only becomes fully known when the Babe laid in a manger was laid in a tomb, after dying a cruel death on a cross, to await the Resurrection. God's love was shown in the sharing of His Son who was the only sacrifice who could take away men's sins.

The second facet of Christmas is the fact of man's sinfulness. Man is a sinner without hope or remedy of his own making. If it were not for the fact of man's sinful deeds and nature, there would have been no reason for God to empty Heaven's Storeroom to provide for man's salvation. This may be the reason why many use this holiday season as time of intemperance, especially in their drinking. It provides a means of dulling their minds so they would not have to consider their true standing before God. If the mind is dulled by drink, then men might be able to delude themselves into thinking that they are worshiping rather than partying. Intemperance, whether in food, drink, or frolic is a poor excuse for the worship that is due the Saviour.

As Christians we need to take care in our celebration of the season as well. If we remember the reason for the season then we must take care that we do not attempt to celebrate the season as the world does. When we become more focused on Christmas trees, expensive presents, large meals, and just feeling good, we have adopted the world's patterns of celebration. This should be a

(continued on page 4)

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SWORD AND TRUMPET



From the Editor's Desk

Paul M. Emerson

GUEST EDITORIAL

Celebrate or Not?

by Leonard Sankey

Whatever we may think about the common modes of celebrating Christmas, if we follow scriptural patterns, then we ought to celebrate the birth of Christ.

True—we don't know that Christ was born on the 25th of December. He probably wasn't. And the date that is used may have pagan origins. (So does "Easter." Call it Resurrection Sunday!)

True—we may conclude that some of the symbols of the season may have pagan origins. Some tell me that the tree, the lights, sending cards, giving gifts, the creche, and a festive meal, all have their sources in heathen observances, pre-dating the Christian "Christmas."

True—we may be sure that the excesses of the season are not Christian—involvement in the crass materialism, commercialism, and "in-debt-ism" are out of place for the sincere and devout follower of Christ. Our families and friends would survive the season without another thing being given them.

True—Santa Claus and reindeer, pipe-smoking elves, and "Jingle Bell Rock," ought not have any place in the life of a

humble believer in Christ.

True—a better observance of the season would be to give donations to the Lord's work in the name of the person for whom we would have purchased a gift. Just think what would happen, even in our holiness ranks, if all of us, instead of buying gifts that are not really necessary, would take that money and send it to our Bible schools, our missionary organizations, our local churches, rescue missions, literature outreach, local soup kitchens, crisis pregnancy centers, Christian law firms that represent churches, etc. Think of indebtedness that could be lifted, missionaries that could be sent, printing that could be accomplished, students whose schooling could be underwritten, the hungry that could be fed, the mother who might be saved from an abortion.

However, please note with me that the first Christmas (to use the word that most commonly describes the events of which we speak, though some object to the term itself as indicating the Catholic mass of Christ)—whenever in the calendar year it occurred—was celebrated in

DECEMBER 2005

PAGE 3

some fairly lofty venues. God Himself celebrated the occasion by giving the One Greatest Gift that has ever been given. He gave His one and only Son with the ultimate purpose of providing salvation for the entire human race.

An angel celebrated the first Christmas—by appearances (to Mary and Joseph; and to Zacharias and Elizabeth, who could be considered a part of the whole picture), and an announcement that forever changed the world. . . . “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day . . . a Saviour. . . .”

A great host of heavenly beings joined the angel in celebrating—they praised the Lord at the birth of Christ, saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will to men.”

In a bit more earthly milieu, Elizabeth (Luke 1:41-45), Zacharias (Luke 1:67-79), and the virgin Mary (Luke 1:46-55), all celebrated, and the embryonic John the Baptist also got in on the festivities, leaping for joy in the womb when his mother heard the news! (Luke 1:41, 44).

The shepherds celebrated the first Christmas—running to the scene of the Babe’s birth.

Simeon and Anna celebrated: they had been waiting for this day for years. The Magi—they really celebrated: making a long trip, watching a light hung in the sky, bearing gifts with them, stirring a city, angering a king, worshiping the Christ Child, and, being warned by God, left for home.

I have no desire to practice the Roman mass of Christ. I have little interest in the maddening crowds, the expensive gifts, the credit card debt, and sleighs flying through the air drawn by reindeer, guided by one guy out front with a red nose. I think the silliness of the culture is degrading to the soaring reality of the occasion.

On the other hand, since we don’t know for sure when Christ was born, and

since heaven and earth show us the way of great joy in that birth, and since there may be no better time to draw our minds toward God’s unspeakable gift . . . I would say we ought to celebrate sometime, even as God, angels, Elizabeth, John, Zacharias, Mary, shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and the Magi all rejoiced.

Perhaps now is as good a time as any! ■

—Taken from *Convention Herald*



Christ of Christmas . . . cont’d.

time when we can first reflect on the love of God and the proof of that love in the giving of His Son. We should take time to realize that there was a reason for the sending of His Son. It was not for His need but ours that He felt to make that sacrifice for us. Once we have put the season into that perspective, then we might know better how we should celebrate it.

Certainly a large part of our celebration should center on our families. It offers a good time to fellowship with our loved ones. It may provide a time when the truths of the Gospel might be re-instilled in our families. It is a time when we can enjoy times of fellowship with fellow believers. We may be able to share the message of the season through singing and sharing, especially with those who are unable to reciprocate. It can be a time to teach children how to share rather than how to hoard and covet.

Celebrating a Christian Christmas may mean a change in our lifestyles. When we realize the basis of the season we can pattern our celebration in a way consistent with the gift of God and the true nature of man. That means that we must find ways to place Christ, not ourselves, at the center of our celebration.

Merry Christmas! May it be centered in the love of God and in the death, burial, and resurrection of His Son! ■

—Taken from *The Bible Monitor*

THE SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS



A Devotional Commentary



by David L. Burkholder

DECEMBER 4, 2005

God's Servant

Isaiah 42:1-8

December's lessons are taken primarily from the latter part of the Book of Isaiah with the last two including verses from the Book of Luke. The theme of the month is the prophetically promised Messiah, His work, and His coming. The lessons progress along this theme and culminate with the Christmas lesson where we celebrate Jesus' coming to earth as a babe to fulfill the prophecies outlined in earlier lessons.

There can be no doubt who is speaking in this passage from Isaiah. It is the Lord God. In verse 1 He presents the Servant. In verses 2, 3, and 4, He describes His character. In verses 5, 6, and 7, He speaks directly to Him. In verse 8 He identifies Himself and cites His sovereign credentials. There can also be no doubt as to the identity of the Servant. He is none other than the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah, the Anointed of God. (See Matthew 12:14-21; Luke 4:16-21).

The Lord God, Creator of heaven and earth, Sustainer of all things, states that the Servant He has chosen to fulfill His will for mankind is dependable and just. He will not clamor for attention, but go about His work with meekness, gentleness, compassion, and integrity. He will be an encourager to the weak. He will not falter or become discouraged in His work. In short, He will be an ideal Servant because within

Him reside all the attributes of the Father God.

In verse 5, God the Father establishes His authority as the basis for calling forth and commissioning the Servant. He promises His constant presence as the Servant carries out His commission to become a covenant for the people of Israel and a spiritual light for the Gentiles. (See Luke 2:25-32.)

That the Servant's primary task was to be spiritual healing is above debate. However, as we observe from His ministry, He was also concerned about the physical needs of mankind. Verse 7 can well refer to spiritual enlightenment and healing, especially due to its close relationship to the preceding phrase. (See also Isaiah 9:2.)

At the end of this passage, verse 8, the Lord God reiterates His sovereignty. (See also 43:11.) He is sovereign; He is jealous. In establishing Himself as the only true God, He also establishes the integrity of His Servant, the One He has commissioned to carry out His plans for mankind.

This lesson lays important groundwork for the lessons which follow, culminating in the account of the Servant's arrival on earth as the Babe in a manger. God's plan and His timing of that plan is not haphazard or careless. His plan was in place from eternity past (1 Peter 1:19, 20), and continues to move toward ultimate fulfillment even as centuries come and go.

God chose His Servant, established His credentials, outlined His work, promised His continuing presence and

support, then sent Him to earth. Everything is in place for the benefit of mankind. The choice is now up to man to respond.

For thought and discussion

1. In regard to verse 1 in our lesson, find New Testament references that reaffirm what God the Father says here about God the Son.
2. Note how Jesus' ministry fulfilled the prophecies made centuries in advance concerning Him.
3. It may seem strange to think of the Son of God as a servant, but note how He modeled this role and accept that as a challenge for your own life and service.
4. Israel was God's chosen people and He favored them in many ways. Note, however, in this passage, the bold proclamation of the universality of God's love for all mankind and His provision for their salvation.
5. Study the sovereignty of God. How did He describe Himself to Moses?

DECEMBER 11, 2005

Strength for the Task

Isaiah 49:5, 6; 50:4-9

Last Sunday's lesson focused primarily on God's choice of His Servant. Today's emphasis is on the Servant and His commitment to His assigned task. Verses 1-4 in Chapter 49 emphasize His call, verses 5 and 6 His task, and the verses from Chapter 50 His absolute obedience to the task in spite of the cruel opposition He would face. This lesson does not stand alone. It is an integral part of the theme of the month and should be studied in that light.

It is clear in these first verses (5, 6), that it is Jesus speaking. In contrast to last Sunday's lesson where God the Father assigns the task, here Jesus personally acknowledges the task as His.

He also acknowledges the presence and strengthening power of the Father in the discharge of the task. Verse 5 speaks to the incarnation, God's Son becoming man in order to fulfill God's requirements for both Israel's and the Gentiles' salvation.

We see clearly in these verses the two-part mission of Jesus—to bring God's chosen people Israel to a full understanding of God's will and purpose, and to extend the gospel of salvation to the Gentile world. (See again Luke 2:25-32.) It is worthy of note that the universality of the gospel is made so clear in these Old Testament Scriptures. God's loving concern extended to all peoples, not just the favored Jews. The whole world is His concern.

In Chapter 50 Jesus outlines His preparation and commitment to the task assigned by the Father. He also affirms His trust in the Father's constant care and protection. By the same token He acknowledges that no adversarial power will be able to stand against Him (verses 8, 9).

Did Jesus really need instruction in speaking (50:4) or knowing how to minister to people's needs? Of course not. However, as assurance of His full capability to meet every need of mankind, His qualifications are here outlined to give reassurance to every seeking, troubled soul.

We also notice here (v. 5), Jesus' complete submission to the Father's will, in spite of the extreme disrespect and cruel torture He would face in carrying out His divine assignment (v. 6). (See Matthew 26:39, 67.) He knew also that obedience and submission would be rewarded by the Father's presence and help. We need to remember that even though this was the Son of God Almighty, He was recognizing things He would face as a man on the earth.

Those who oppose Christ will fade into oblivion. No power, no person can stand against the Son of God. In Isaiah

we read the prophecy. In the gospels we see it played out. Yes, Christ suffered tremendously, but He was ultimately triumphant. Today He lives, continuing His task of ministering on man's behalf.

One lesson we can learn from today's text and the example of Jesus, is to remember to draw on God's resources for all our needs. The supply is abundant. And He is generous. He responds to those who acknowledge their need and come to Him in expectancy. He provided for His Son. He will provide for His children.

For thought and discussion

1. When asked to accept an assignment we usually want to know what we may face in carrying it out, and may make our decision based on those facts. Let the example of Jesus, who foreknew the suffering and disgrace He would face, challenge you in weighing decisions for service.
2. Find other references in the Old Testament to the universality of the gospel.
3. What is the purpose of prophecy? its importance?
4. Since Jesus found it essential to listen to the voice of the Father in directing Him in His work, how much more should we? Discuss how we can be more attentive to God's direction in our lives and ministries.
5. After completing your study of this lesson you should pause to thank Jesus again for all He went through on your behalf.

DECEMBER 18, 2005

The Servant's Nature

Isaiah 53:1-3; Luke 1:46-55

Today's lesson, taken from Isaiah and Luke, shows us the nature of the Servant. You will want to read the context for both passages for a more com-

plete understanding. The passage from Isaiah is from the "Suffering Servant" passage. The section from Luke is Mary's Magnificat—her hymn of praise to God for His mercy and goodness, both to her and her people.

In Isaiah 53:1, Isaiah seems to be speaking on behalf of all the prophets who have foretold Messiah's coming. Though God had proved His trustworthiness in many ways to His people in the past, they were still portrayed as unbelieving. Isaiah's prophecy, some 700 years before the advent, describes the subsequent rejection of Jesus and His ministry with accuracy.

Jesus' humble, unglamorous beginnings did not match the Jews' expectations of their Messiah. And in His person "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him" (NIV). Being offended at His humble appearance, they rejected Him and treated Him with disrespect and contempt. Sadly, Israel missed the message of the One who came to suffer so they would not need to suffer. (See John 1:1-12.)

In the Luke passage, following Elisabeth's greeting, Mary burst into a paean of praise to God for His goodness and mercy. She recognizes both her lowly station in life and her elevation by God to a position of honor. She is at His service, yet she stands in awe of His choice of her. Verse 50 gives us a hint of the spiritual character which qualified her for this role in God's plan.

Mary goes on, recounting the acts of God in dealing with man. By the strength of His arm He scatters the proud and overcomes the mighty. He exerts His sovereignty over the puny efforts of man to elevate himself or gain control by his own strength or endeavor.

God shows severity to those who would challenge His authority and power, but He shows mercy to the humble. There are two sides of God, as Mary points out. God responds to the

proud and power hungry one way, and to the poor and meek in another. He provides for the poor and lifts them up. He turns His back on those who are self-sufficient and arrogant.

Mary recognizes that the goodness and mercy of God to His people Israel is in direct fulfillment of His promises to Abraham. God had promised to make of Abraham a great nation, and that through that nation all peoples of the world would be blessed. Now Mary finds herself in the stream of that blessing. God Almighty, the Sovereign One, has chosen her to bear His Son, the Servant, Messiah, Deliverer—the One who would indeed be a blessing to all peoples. Can you now understand Mary’s exuberant outburst?

For thought and discussion

1. List as many of the attributes of the Servant as you can find in both Old and New Testament Scriptures.
2. Reflect again on the value of fulfilled prophecy as a means of strengthening our faith.
3. Notice the use of Hebrew poetic parallelism in Mary’s song of praise, the repetition of similar phrases.
4. Why did God choose Mary to be the mother of His Son? What qualified her for this role?
5. Reflect on the goodness and mercy of God, especially as it relates to providing a Saviour for lost and helpless mankind.

DECEMBER 25, 2005

***Good News for the World
(Christmas)***

Isaiah 61:1, 2; Luke 2:8-20

This day the world celebrates the birth of the Saviour. Unfortunately, however, many who celebrate this event fail to grasp the full spiritual realization for themselves personally. For those of us who do, it should cause an

outpouring of thanksgiving to God for His goodness and mercy on behalf of helpless, hopeless mankind. The Good News for the world is that the Saviour has come, and through Him we can experience new life. The impact of this event should challenge us to share the Good News, as did the shepherds in today’s lesson text.

The two verses from Isaiah 61 simply confirm the mission of Jesus, the Servant, of whom we have been studying this month. You will note that Jesus both confirmed His identity and mission by quoting this passage in the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of His public ministry (Luke 4:16-21). Unfortunately, too many people today take this passage in the social sense, but we must remember that Jesus’ mission was primarily to deal with man’s spiritual need. We dare not lose that focus.

In the Luke passage we see response and reaction to the birth of Jesus. (Be sure to read the first seven verses as well.) It is interesting to observe that the humble birth of Jesus who became the Good Shepherd, was first announced to lowly shepherds on the plain of Bethlehem. It is likely that these men in their long night watches often spoke of the anticipated arrival of Messiah. This night their faith was rewarded.

Notice the content of the angel’s message: “Fear not, good tidings, to all people a Saviour.” Those who had accepted the prophecy concerning Him understood the reference to the city of David and His title as Christ the Lord. Further, the shepherds were given a sign to identify this particular baby. He would be found lying in a manger in a lowly cattle shed.

After listening to the praise of the angelic choir, the shepherds hastily made their way to Bethlehem to “see this thing which has come to pass.” To their delight they found the situation as the angel had described. Although we are not specifically told, we can well

imagine that they then worshiped before God's Son, their Saviour.

One of the blessings of the Christmas season is found in sharing. And this the shepherds did, telling the good news far and wide to all they met. Their joy knew no bounds. They were thrilled and filled, and it spilled over to others. Their example of exuberant sharing should challenge us in sharing the Good News in our day.

Can you imagine the multitude of thoughts, questions, and surmisings which went through Mary's mind? Yes, she knew who this Child was, but what lay ahead—for Him, for her? The same faith that was expressed in her acceptance of this role stood strong through the years which followed. (See last Sunday's lesson.)

Today is Christmas, many years after the event recorded in today's lesson. But the joy, the wonder, the exuberance has not dimmed. Let's be faithful in sharing the Good News to a desperately needy world around us.

And have a blessed Christmas.

For thought and discussion

1. How would you respond to those who attempt to make primarily a social statement out of Isaiah 61:1, 2?
2. Marvel at the greatness of God in working out events surrounding the birth of His Son. (Read further than today's lesson.)
3. Why did God choose such humble surroundings for the birth of His Son? And why were the lowly shepherds the first to hear?
4. Mary certainly had much to ponder during her lifetime association with this special child of hers. Reflect on the varied experiences which caused her to think and reflect.
5. The shepherds' ready response to the event of Christ's coming is reminiscent of the apostles' statement in Acts 4:20. May their example inspire us to more joyful and open sharing. ■

William Wilberforce . . . cont'd.

The years 1784-85 proved to be a spiritual turning point for Wilberforce. During those years William traveled Europe with a man from his hometown that was a Christian teacher. As a result, the two men would spend time reading the Bible together. By the end of their trip, William had fully placed his trust in Christ. He also repented of his former manner of life. He committed himself and his money completely to the Lord for His use. He spoke with one of his mentors, John Newton, asking for advice. Newton told Wilberforce to use the position in Parliament that God had given to him to serve the Lord and mankind. After two years of prayer, William felt that God was instructing him to work to end slavery in all of the British colonies, as well as to promote change in the moral character of the nation.

These two tasks were daunting, to say the least, but Wilberforce was persistent. For many years, William, along with his mentor Thornton, had been part of a group called "The Saints," which met in the town of Clapham. Meeting regularly for prayer and to study God's Word, the group had two goals. The first was to get the gospel to the unsaved, and the second was to abolish slavery. Due to William's leading of the Lord and his relationship to the group, The Saints (later known as the Clapham Sect) asked him to lead the movement in Parliament against slavery. The year was 1787.

Many in the nation were opposed to abolition of slavery on purely economic grounds. Slavery in British colonies, as well as in England itself, was thought to be a necessary ingredient of a strong economy. British ships had been involved in the slave trade since 1713. At this time in British history there were some 14,000 slaves in England as well as the many slaves in the British colonies around the world. It was thought that half of the 100,000 slaves transported in 1771 were carried on British ships.

(continued on page 13)

Newslines . . .

by Rebecca Good

incidents events occurrences facts illustrations episodes committees vignettes proceedings problems
experiences crises adventures transactions meetings tragedies scoops reports conferences happenings
bulletins questions reports affairs dramas encounters personages actions tidings et cetera

Higher Costs for Higher Ed

Tuition prices for higher education have been rising for decades, at a rate much faster than inflation. Since 1980, the average tuition price at a public university has almost tripled, even after adjustment is made for inflation. College administrators often say that they raise tuition because the state does not give them enough money. However, some economists say that universities keep raising their prices because they can. Students simply apply for federal aid and are able to attend university regardless of cost.

Student assistance, most of it federal, has increased fourfold since the early 1980s. Not coincidentally, higher education and healthcare are the two sectors of government with the greatest amount of price inflation in recent times.

Since universities can raise tuition, they do so, spending the money on administration, luxurious facilities, and faculty salaries. For example, full professors earn 50 percent more than they did 20 years ago, while working less.

—from *WORLD*

* * * * *

Help for the Boys

More than 185 public schools in America offer some type of gender-specific education. Some educators say that there are such significant differences between boys' and girls' brains that each sex needs a dif-

ferent type of teaching. Others insist that such ideas merely contribute to inequality in education.

The facts are that most teachers are women and they teach the way they themselves learn. Consequently, girls tend to thrive in school. However, of all children diagnosed with learning disabilities, seventy percent are boys. Of all who drop out of high school, eighty percent are boys. Less than 45 percent of college students are male. In many schools, boys are falling behind and must somehow be reached. Gender specific education is one tool that can help.

—from *Newsweek*

* * * * *

Living in the World vs. Living in the Kingdom

During the 2004 presidential election season, some ethicists and theologians wrote and circulated a statement called *Confessing Christ in a World of Violence (CCWV)*. It is still being discussed. Featured on the *Sojourners* magazine website, it has garnered over 300 signatories. Some of these signers are known for their leftward leaning political activism, others are best known for their defense of Christian orthodoxy. Twenty-nine of the signers came from Mennonite institutions.

According to Duke Divinity School's Richard Hays, a chief spokesman for CCWV, the statement is a call to Christians to "seek greater theological clarity about their political language and their

attitudes towards war.” It does not “argue for a radical pacifist stance.” Instead it rises out of concern that “American Evangelicals are idolatrously ‘placing our particular nation-state in a messianic role for which there is no scriptural warrant.’ ”

The statement rightfully declares that allegiance to Christ takes priority over national identity. CCWV believes that nations should look to the international community to solve international problems, rather than following the idolatrous notion of looking to one’s own nation for virtuous action. While CCWV warns that “no nation-state may usurp the place of God,” it offers no similar warning concerning the United Nations or other international organization. Though consultation with the broader world community can certainly offer safeguards, international consensus does not guarantee right action because each nation is made up of sinful, fallen people.

—from *Touchstone*

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The Morality of Assassination?

The Reverend Pat Robertson called for the assassination of a political leader on his Christian Broadcasting Network show “The 700 Club.” Speaking of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez he said, “You know, I don’t know about this doctrine of assassination, but if he thinks we’re trying to assassinate him, I think that we really ought to go ahead and do it. It’s a whole lot cheaper than starting a war, and I don’t think any oil shipments will stop. He continued: “We have the ability to take him out, and I think the time has come that we exercise that ability.”

Robertson initially said that his comments had been misinterpreted, but later apologized.

Six years ago, Robertson spoke positively of the U.S. sending agents to kill Osama Bin Laden, North Korean dictator Kim Jong II and Saddam Hussein. The preacher commented that it was better to

assassinate a leader than to spend billions on a war that hurts civilians and damages a country’s infrastructure.

—from *Daily News-Record*, Harrisonburg, VA

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Kingdoms in Conflict?

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has been behind a yearlong media campaign against Protestant Evangelicals in Russia. The ROC has even used pseudo-documentaries to convince the Russian people that evangelicals are a crazed, heretical sect.

A few years ago, the ROC began quietly asking politicians and bureaucrats to restrict evangelical activities. In 1997, then-President Boris Yeltsin signed a law which subjected new Protestant groups to surveillance and prohibited new church groups unless they could demonstrate 15 years of affiliation to formal, sanctioned activities. Now, the new media campaign seems to be working in that many organizations are afraid to allow Protestant groups to rent their facilities for church services.

The ROC itself was persecuted by Communist atheism during the Soviet Union era, and has regained purpose and clout since that atheistic government’s fall. Russia returned most of the church’s holdings in 2004, including almost 12 million acres of land. Today 55 percent of the Russian population think of themselves as members of the ROC, while 32 percent of the population say that they are non-religious. Evangelicals make up only one-tenth of one percent of the nation’s population.

Even without the harassment of the ROC, Evangelicals in Russia have their own problems. Differing denominations fight over doctrinal variations and generally distrust one another. In such a climate, it is difficult for the tiny percentage of evangelical Christians to grow.

—from *WORLD*

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Vacation Destination: The Moon

The Virginia-based Space Adventures has announced it will commence tourist flights to the moon. Two passengers and a cosmonaut will soon fly around the moon. Tickets for the trip cost \$100 million each. Also, the new Virgin Atlantic Airlines division, called Virgin Galactic, plans regular space service for 2007. All of Virgin's planned flights are already sold out, with tickets costing \$100,000. The people behind Virgin Galactic were the winners of the \$10 million Ansari X Prize in 2004, awarded to the team who could build and fly a fully private space plane into space twice in two weeks.

—from *WORLD*

The End of China's One-Child Policy?

In 2002, the Chinese parliament voted to allow couples to have more than one child if they would pay for them. In poor areas this can be around \$365 for the first additional child—about four times the average annual net income. In rural areas, women with a healthy son are not allowed any more children, whereas a woman whose first baby is a girl or handicapped is allowed another baby. However, in rural areas, local leaders still feel pressure to keep the birthrate low. Too many babies can prevent an official from getting promoted.

In an area called Linyi, in China's eastern Shandong province, officials were reprovved for having more extra births than any other part of Shandong. This culminated in one of the most brutal and mass sterilization campaigns in years. In March of 2005, officials began searching villages for illegal pregnant women. When they found one, they forced an abortion upon her. Women who already had the maximum allotment of children were forcefully sterilized. Many women and their families resisted, often going into hiding. In one county of Linyi, 7,000 people were forcefully sterilized between March and July. Some family members were beaten to death while trying to pro-

tect their loved one from sterilization. Others were required to pay for "study sessions" where they were forced to admit their "wrong thinking."

While officials in Linyi say nothing improper has happened, officials on the national level are investigating the situation, and insist they will punish officials who broke national regulations.

—from *TIME*

Growth of the Orthodox

"Nearly half of the students in America's two largest Orthodox seminaries are converts. About 80% of the church's converts come from Evangelical and Charismatic churches, the rest from mainline denominations."

—from *Touchstone*

Composition of the Catholic Priesthood

"Six percent [of men ordained to the Catholic priesthood in the United States] are converts and one-quarter from other countries, principally Vietnam, Mexico, the Philippines, and Poland."

—from *Touchstone*

Playboy Pain

When Karen Covell, got her big break in Hollywood, she was thrilled. But her first assignment was troubling—a one-hour profile of Playboy mogul Hugh Hefner for a television show. As a Christian, Ms. Covell was appalled. However, she discovered that her producer was also a Christian. Together, they decided to try to uncover Hefner's background—what made him what he is today.

The story took a look at Hefner's early life and spiritual background. It culminated with an interview of the Playboy mogul in the opulent Playboy mansion, surrounded by Playboy bunnies, clad in his black pajamas, saying that "he's still just a little boy trying to find love." Hefner told of being raised by harsh,

distant parents who never told him they loved him. He said that his mother never hugged or kissed him, because of her fear of germs. The interview powerfully exposed the pain behind the Playboy facade, the futile attempt to substitute sex for love. —from *WORLD*

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The Gifts of God

When educators view children through secular eyes, they worry that children will be hindered by hurt feelings and poor self-image. In a book about building self-esteem in children, two educators say “that you are lovable with or without faults; the faults are related to what you have or what you do, not who you are. You, the person, are completely worthy of being loved.” They go on to encourage teachers to use relaxation techniques with students, having the children repeat chants such as, “I like myself. I am happy. I am in perfect health.”

As Christians we know that intelligence, though greatly valued by the world, is not nearly the best gift. We see each child as equally valuable because he is made in God’s image, but we also know that God has given unique gifts to each child. Each child matters as much to God as the genius or the prodigy. Each child is God’s gift to us. —from *Touchstone*

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Liberty Goes Casual

Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, has recently eased its dress code. Students are now allowed to wear jeans and flip-flops to class. Shorts are prohibited for classes except for physical fitness, but are allowed in the dining hall and academic buildings after 4:30 p.m. Shorts must be of mid-length or longer. The vice-president of student affairs at Liberty, said the relaxation of rules are the result of a regular reevaluation of the dress code and student input in the matter. Five years ago men were required to wear ties and women to wear long skirts.

—from *Daily News-Record*, Harrisonburg, VA

William Wilberforce . . . cont’d.

In May of 1789 William gave an eloquent speech in Parliament about the evil of slavery. The speech lasted for three and a half hours! As a result, some prominent men began to listen and threw their support behind Wilberforce and what he was trying to do. Even John Wesley wrote a letter of support to William.

Beginning in 1791, a bill to abolish the slave trade was presented to the Parliament every year. Opposition ran high from the slavery lobby, and success was slow. But gradually, more and more lawmakers were persuaded to vote in favor of abolition of this evil. A bill to abolish this trafficking of human beings was successfully voted into law in 1807. At the same time Wilberforce was working hard to reform the morals of the culture by seeing to it that current laws were enforced.

In 1797, in the midst of all his work, William Wilberforce, at the age of 38, married Barbara Spooner. The newlyweds made Broomfield Road, Clapham, their home.

Wilberforce would not rest until the whole institution of slavery was abolished altogether. Although ill health forced him to leave politics in 1825, others took up the fight in his place. Thankfully, in July of 1833, just four days before his death, Wilberforce received word that a bill had been passed in Parliament to abolish all slavery in the British colonies. He had labored for forty years and had the joy of seeing the fruit of his labors.

William Wilberforce was a generous man of simplicity who was concerned about the plight of his fellowman. He gave of his whole life to fulfill his promise made to the Lord many years before. Because of his devotion to God’s will, a whole nation was transformed through a bloodless “revolution”—one that would prepare the nation for the Victorian era which was to follow. His efforts also paved the way for missionary work in Africa in the future.

William Wilberforce is buried in Westminster Abbey. —Gail L. Emerson

Christmas: The Strange Holiday

by Arno Froese

Why is Christmas a strange holiday? First, it has no biblical basis. Easter, a Christian holiday, finds its origin in the Jewish holiday of Passover. Pentecost, the second of the three annual festivals recorded in Deuteronomy 16:12, was essentially linked to the Passover. This festival expressed the fact that God had chosen a race and separated it from all the other nations of the world. This prophetically points to the Church, which is also separated from the world, yet its individual members are residents of every country on earth.

But the Bible is silent about Christmas. In English we call it "Christmas," which means "Christ-Mass," a Catholic celebration with no biblical roots. *Webster's Dictionary* defines the

Movies, television shows and the entire commercial circus represent something other than a holiday that is supposed to honor the birth of Christ.

word *mass* as being "The Roman Catholic Eucharistic rite consisting of prayers and ceremonies centered on the consecration of bread and wine as a real, though mystical, reenactment of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross."

The same is true when we consider other languages. For

example, in German, it's *Weihnachten*, which literally means, "anointed night." In Spanish, it's *Navidad*, meaning "nativity." And in French, it's *Noel*, which means "natal."

Due to an apparent confusion in Christendom, some refuse to celebrate

this holiday at all. So what should Christians do? Can we find an answer in Scripture? Romans 14:5 contains this important advice: "One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." This Scripture reveals the uniqueness of true Bible believers; we are not bound to certain national, cultural or religious holidays. We have the liberty to act on our convictions.

Of course we know Christmas is supposed to be the time we celebrate the birth of Christ. But Scripture doesn't give any instructions about celebrating the honor or memory of this occasion. Scripture does, however, admonish us to remember His death and that we do when we partake in the Lord's Supper.

Why Do We Celebrate Christmas?

Word of Life Missionaries Claudio and Beate Thober wrote this report regarding the holiday we call "Christmas":

"Why Do We Celebrate Christmas?

That was the question the German Special Institute for Children and Youth Research headquarters in Munich, asked over 700 children between the ages of 6 and 12. Every third child did not know the reason why Christmas is celebrated. Fifteen percent had no idea that Christmas was related to the Christian faith. Eighteen percent attempted to find an answer using different explanations. Six percent of the children instantly confessed that they don't have the foggiest idea what Christmas is all about:

'We were really surprised that 39 percent knew nothing about Christmas,' said Alex Dammler, Business Manager of the Institute. 'Especially frightening are the results in the 10-12 year category. Twenty percent left the answer totally blank.'

Actually, this result is not surprising when we consider the Christmas celebrated today has little, if any, connection to the biblical occasion. Popular songs such as "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas," movies, television shows and the entire commercial circus represent something other than a holiday that is supposed to honor the birth of Christ.

The Biblical Christmas

"And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

This is the Gospel message proclaimed by the angel of the Lord. Although it was initially addressed to the Jewish people, the same offer was extended to the Gentiles when Jesus commanded His disciples to go into the world and make more disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

Christmas Is Fulfillment

Matthew reported the fulfillment of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus escaping from the threat of King Herod: "And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son" (Matthew 2:15). Even King Herod's command to slaughter the children in Bethlehem is documented as being fulfilled: "Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet" (verse 17).

When Jesus returned to Israel from Egypt, we read: "And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it

might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene" (verse 23).

Note this is the fulfillment of Bible prophecy: "Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled

which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us" (Matthew 1:22, 23).

Approximately 750 years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah wrote: "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

"Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us" (Matthew 1:22, 23).

Forgiveness of Sins

Eternal salvation was offered for the first time through the forgiveness of sin. Sin was only covered up under the Old Covenant. But according to God's holiness, He must execute righteous judgment, which required the death of the sinner. God is not only righteous, but He is also merciful, longsuffering, and above all else, He is love. Here we are reminded of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

The Cover Up

As already mentioned, the Old Covenant did not offer forgiveness for sins. Hebrews 10:4 documents: "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls

and of goats should take away sins.” God’s mercy and longsuffering provided a covering for the sins of His people until Jesus established the New Covenant.

Moses spoke about the prophet who would offer the New Covenant: “I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him” (Deuteronomy 18:18).

The Old and New Covenant

Jeremiah was able to foresee the distinction between the Old and New

“ . . . This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.”

Covenants more than 600 years before Christ was born: “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was a husband unto them, saith the LORD. But this shall be the

covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD:

for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The New Covenant would be dramatically different from the Old Covenant, which had to be diligently taught, as is evident from Deuteronomy 6:8, 9: “And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.”

Later, Joshua was instructed to “be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest. This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success” (Joshua 1:7, 8).

The Gift of the Holy Spirit

But now God says: “They shall teach no more every man his neighbor and every man his brother saying know the Lord for they shall all know me.” When would that happen? When forgiveness takes place: “I will remember their sins no more.”

First John 2:20 further explains: “But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things.” This was the implementation of the New Covenant, which begins with hearing God’s Word: “In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise” (Ephesians 1:13). From that moment, we have assurance of God’s forgiveness of our sins. The Holy Spirit who lives in our hearts then guides our lives. Jesus

said, "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" (John 14:26).

The First Cover-Up

Adam and Eve introduced sin to the world. They disobeyed God and chose to obey the deceptive words of Satan. Genesis 3:7 says the moment they sinned, "the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons." Now man was able to distinguish between good and evil, an attribute that was not intended for man but belongs to God: "And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever" (verse 22). Had they been able to add another trespass and take from the tree of life they would have lived for ever, but it would be in rebellion against God the Creator.

Adam and Eve used the leaves from the fig tree to cover their nakedness. Even more, verse 8 says: "Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden." Here we see the beginning of the great cover up, but God did not accept it: "Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them" (verse 21). This prophetically illustrates the necessity of a death to take place in order to cover man's sins: "Without shedding of blood is no remission [of sin]" (Hebrews 9:22).

It is significant that the devil also succeeded in destroying God's message with Adam and Eve's first son Cain. Genesis 4:3, 4 reports: "And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain

brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and his offering." Cain should have known better; his offering, however, did not reflect the knowledge that the life of an animal is in its blood. What was the result? Verse 8 says: "And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him." The first ecumenical dialogue ended in Cain murdering his righteous brother Abel. The last ecumenical action will also result in the death of the righteous: "And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed" (Revelation 13:15).

Before Christmas

The record of another important birth is recorded in Luke 1:13-17: "But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him

"But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness . . ."

in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zacharias doubted and became dumb as a result until the child was born: "And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God" (Luke 1:64).

Israel has more enemies than any other nation on the face of the earth. And hatred towards Zionism and the Jews will increase globally.

The Remission of Sin Covenant

"And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of

Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; as he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; The oath which he sware to our father Abraham, That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life. And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:67-79).

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This significant prophecy will help us understand how Zacharias could speak about a prophecy that had not been fulfilled as if it had been. Notice the past tense is used: "He has visited and redeemed his people." That was before the birth of Christ, before Calvary and before Pentecost. At that time Israel was not redeemed; it was still in sin and transgression. That condition is still true even until today. Yet the prophecy says He has redeemed His people.

Israel's Salvation to Come

Another issue worth mentioning is the promise contained in verse 71 that Israel would be saved from its enemies. That was not the case then nor is it today. Israel has more enemies than any other nation on the face of the earth. And hatred towards Zionism and the Jews will increase globally. Therefore, we must try to understand these things from a heavenly perspective; these prophecies were fulfilled, but they had to be implemented on earth in their due time. Israel will indeed live in peace and no one will hate the Jews. Zechariah 8:23 will be fulfilled: "Thus saith the LORD of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you."

The Herald of His Coming

John's calling was made clear: "And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins" (verses 76, 77). Again, this was salvation through the forgiveness of sins; there was no more cover up.

John testified: "And he confessed,

SWORD AND TRUMPET

and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that Prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? That we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias” (John 1:20-23). John the Baptist answered with Scripture, thereby pointing to Isaiah 40:3: “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

Fulfilled, or to Be Fulfilled?

When would this prophecy be fulfilled? Isaiah 40:2 answers: “Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (Isaiah 40:2). Notice it is specifically emphasized that Jerusalem, which represents Israel and the Jewish people, has received from the Lord’s hand “double for all her sins.” Here we are reminded that this was not the return of the Jews to Jerusalem during Jeremiah’s time because at that time the people confessed: “And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us such deliverance as this” (Ezra 9:13). History documents that 14 million Jews were murdered after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., which includes the most horrendous murder of all time that took place under the leadership of Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich. No doubt that is part of the “double for all her sins” punishment.

Progressive Prophecy Fulfilled

Everything was in its place when Jesus was born; the temple stood on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem and the Jews had freedom to practice their religion. The herald of the coming of the Messiah had arrived; His message was clear: “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2).

Everything was indeed ready—that is, everything but the people. Jesus later posed a question to His enemies: “The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him?” (Matthew 21:25). Although many people did believe, the religious leaders, who were Israel’s representatives and authority, were definitely in opposition to both the message and the Messenger.

Now my question to you: Have you accepted forgiveness for your sins? Jesus came to this earth to pay the penalty for our sins. On Calvary’s cross He cried out, “It is finished,” which means the debt for our sins has been paid for in full. You owe it to yourself to make sure you have followed the Bible’s clear instruction to repent. That was the challenge posed to the Jews at that time, but He is coming again. Therefore, this is addressed to you: “Repent, Jesus is coming again.” You may celebrate Christmas any way you want. You may believe Jesus is a historical reality as recorded in the Bible. You may wholeheartedly endorse the slogan, “Keep Christ in Christmas.” But those things will not be an

“And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7).

iota of help if you have not personally repented before His countenance, asked His forgiveness and received new life through Him.

The Birth of the Messiah

The Gospel of Luke contains great details about the birth of Jesus in the town of Bethlehem. He informs us the whole world had to be moved due to a law issued by Caesar Augustus that every citizen should be registered or “taxed” in their towns of birth. Since that time, every person who ever lived has been registered in order to be taxed by his or her respective government.

But this “taxing” served a more important purpose: the fulfillment of Bible prophecy. Joseph and Mary were residents of Nazareth in Judea but prophecy said Messiah could only be

Joseph and Mary were residents of Nazareth in Judea but prophecy said Messiah could only be born in Bethlehem. Thus, God was behind Caesar’s decree to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem.

born in Bethlehem. Thus, God was behind Caesar’s decree to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem: “And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7).

The Manger Sign

Shepherds were the first to hear about this important event: “And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (Luke 2:10-12). What was the sign? He

would be lying in a manger. No person in his right mind would place a newborn baby anywhere near a place where animals eat. But here we can already see the humility with which Jesus came into the world. The circumstances could not have been worse. There is no need to detail the filth of the manger to understand that this was an inappropriate place for a child to be born. Verse 16 says: “And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.”

Heavenly Rejoicing

This birth was unlike any other: “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (verses 13, 14). Heaven rejoiced at the birth of the Saviour.

From a human perspective Jesus was born at the wrong place and His birth was announced to the wrong people. After all, God had chosen Jerusalem from all the other cities on the earth. Jerusalem was where the Temple stood and where royalty resided; that would have seemed like the ideal place for the Messiah to be born.

King of the Jews?

The religious authorities were also surprised to hear the news proclaimed by foreigners, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews?” (Matthew 2:2). Obviously this announcement was unexpected, and it was terrible news for King Herod: “When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (verse 3). The news spread quickly and Jerusalem was in an uproar.

How did King Herod react? “And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people

together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born" (Matthew 2:4). He went to the right people; the chief priests and the scribes knew Scripture, they read the prophets, so they knew the answer, "And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel" (Matthew 2:5, 6). But here we see the Christmas message failed to touch the hearts of those who knew Scripture. No records in Scripture say the scribes and the Pharisees went to Bethlehem to worship the newborn King. Obviously they believed the Scripture but had only a head knowledge that didn't reach their hearts. These people turned out to be the greatest enemies of Jesus Christ. You see my dear friend, it is not enough to just believe the historical fact that Jesus was born; that kind of belief leads you nowhere. Facts must be confirmed by faith and the Bible says that faith "is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

Peace on Earth?

The message of peace on earth and good will towards men has not yet been fulfilled. We live during a time of wars, rumors of wars, destruction, and murder. But this proclamation for peace on earth and good will toward men comes from heaven. This is the center of Christmas: peace and good will through the forgiveness of sins.

What happens when we become believers in Jesus Christ and accept His gift of salvation, which He accom-

plished by His self-sacrifice on Calvary's cross? Philippians 4:7 is fulfilled: "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

The Ultimate Sacrifice

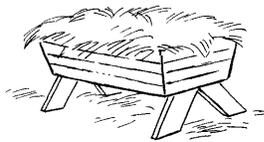
Why did Jesus come to earth? He was born to die for the sins of mankind. The Bible

says: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only

begotten Son of God" (John 3:15-18). From a biblical perspective, that is the true meaning of Christmas. Jesus was born to die so that we wouldn't have to die in our sins but be born again and live forever. Christmas is not about lights, festivities, nativity scenes, choirs, or shopping; Christmas is about surrendering our lives to the One who gave His life for us! ■

Used with permission.
—Midnight Call

The message of peace on earth and good will towards men has not yet been fulfilled. We live during a time of wars, rumors of wars, destruction and murder. But this proclamation for peace on earth and good will toward men comes from heaven.



APOSTASY

What it is. How it happens. How to avoid it.

by David L. Burkholder

Apostasy Defined

“Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall” (2 Peter 1:10).

Apostasy is defined as abandonment of what one has voluntarily professed, a total desertion of principles of faith, a falling away; to disavow, reject. Politicians switching parties are said to commit political apostasy by abandonment of their party’s principles. Spiritual apostasy is defined as those who forsake faith in the Lord Jesus, abandon the principles of God’s Word, and live according to the sensual dictates of their own warped and deceived minds. In the words of 1 Timothy 4:1: *“Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.”* Adam Clarke comments on the phrase, *“shall depart from the faith”* as follows: *“They will ‘apostatize’ from the faith, that is, from Christianity; renouncing the whole system in effect, by bringing in doctrines which render its essential truths null and void, or denying and renouncing such doctrines as are essential to Christianity as a system of salvation.”* Apostasy, then, is the antithesis of godliness. It is denying God and His principles and elevating something else to a position of authority in one’s life.

It is a serious matter to abandon faith. Hebrews 6:4-6 tells us that, *“Those who were once enlightened . . . [who] have tasted the good word of God . . . [and] were partakers of the Holy Ghost,”* those who at one point in time came to a personal, saving knowledge of

Christ, who experienced *“repentance from dead works, and faith toward God”* (v. 1). *“If they shall fall away,”* turn from the faith, apostatize, reject Christ Who is the only means of salvation, *“It is impossible . . . to renew them again unto repentance,”* because they have rejected the only means of salvation. (See also Hebrews 10:26-29.) Turning from faith and living an unrepentant life condemns one to eternal damnation. It’s just that simple. That’s the seriousness of apostasy, the abandonment of faith, putting oneself at odds with God—for time and eternity.

Jude 1-19 portrays the characteristics of those who are apostate. Jude wrote to warn saints against the possibility and peril of apostasy. There were wolves in the fold in disguise. Paul also warned the Ephesian elders of this potentiality in his parting words to them in Acts 20:28-30. How are these deceivers described in the Book of Jude? They were subtle—they crept in unawares. They were ungodly men—replacing the grace of God with license. They were fearless men—rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Saviour. They were immoral, brash, and impudent men. They were greedy men. They were hypocrites, hollow, vile men. They sought personal advantage. They mocked what was holy. They were devoid of God’s Spirit. The list goes on: they were unbelieving, proud, sensual, insolent, envious, rebellious, abusive, boasters, flatterers, divisive.

These men were false teachers, teaching by word and life what was contrary to the doctrine of God. They had infiltrated the brotherhood. The saints were

in danger of being led away from their position in Christ through their false teaching and sensual living. Warning was needed. In his brief epistle, Jude exposed them, gave examples of apostasy from the past and warned the saints to maintain a close relationship with God in order to avoid falling away.

In addition to giving heed to false teaching, there are at least three other areas mentioned or suggested in the Book of Jude which carry potential for apostasy. They are: 1) Following the desires of the flesh; 2) Spiritual neglect; and 3) Willful disobedience to the Word of God. Each of these will be discussed more fully in the following.

Though the Israelites were God's favored people, He destroyed those that turned away from Him in unbelief and disobedience, evidenced by their failure to enter the Promised Land at His command, Jude 5. In verse 6 we see that even angels, that high order of created beings who attempted to seize position given to others, were condemned by God to chains, awaiting their final judgment. Peter says in 2 Peter 2:4: "*God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment.*" When the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah became unbearable, God overthrew those cities with the fire of His wrath (Jude 7). Unbelief, rebellion, immorality, all are signs of apostasy, of failure to follow God's law. And all such God will judge.

These are examples from the past. However, we do well to ask, just where does the church stand today in regard to the dangers of apostasy? Are false teachers turning people from faith to folly? Is spiritual neglect lulling Christians into spiritual apathy and decline? Is Christian liberty being replaced by licentiousness? Is willful disobedience to the Word of God being winked at? The answers are evident. And Jude has much to say on these matters by way of

warning for the church today. The Book of Jude contains much valuable teaching on the importance of maintaining a close and vital relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ in order to avoid the damnable consequences of apostasy.

Apostasy means departure from a position once held, an abandonment of principles once adhered to. It means exchanging one set of values for another set, of lesser value. It means the forsaking of guiding principles which reflect God's will for one's life. Therefore, we need to examine ourselves and ask frankly and honestly if there has been movement away from God and His Word in our lives, thus putting ourselves in danger of spiritual apostasy. As we reflect on the characteristics of apostates we need to determine that by God's grace we will avoid falling into their sins and subsequent condemnation. God hates sin. He will not countenance disobedience, even in His favored people. Pledge that you will never find yourself at odds with God, the end result of apostasy.

How Does Apostasy Happen?

In 1 Timothy 4:1 we read: "*The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons*" (NIV). That we are indeed living in the last times few would argue. That, as we observe the contemporary religious scene and see ample evidence of apostasy, also few would disagree with. How then can we avoid the pitfalls which lead to apostasy? That should be an ever present concern for every child of God.

The true nature of apostasy as we have observed, is the abandonment of faith. The word of the Spirit as we note in the above verse is that men will abandon faith, and follow seducing, deceiving spirits into the acceptance of false doctrine. That puts them at estrangement with God. James 4:4 tells

us that *“the friendship of the world is enmity with God.”* Enmity means “being at odds with God.” Hebrews 10:28-31 tells us what happened when an Israelite turned away from God’s commandments: *“A man who violated the law of Moses died without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses.”* And what happens to men today who spurn God’s grace? *“How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay.’ And again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (Hebrews 10:29-31). Being an enemy of God puts one in a very precarious position, one of judgment, a position to be avoided at all costs.

Apostasy is at times the conscious, willful rejection of Christ and His principles for salvation and holy living. The apostate makes mockery of God’s grace and thereby shuts himself off from the only means of salvation. For that situation there is no remedy—save by a miracle of God’s grace. Apostasy is insidious. It doesn’t happen all at once. It happens gradually, over time, one step at a time. It may begin with a thought injected by a false teacher, which leads to doubt on some accepted principle, which may lead ultimately to disobedience, and from disobedience to unbelief, and from unbelief to the repudiation of the principles of faith. The potential for apostasy begins any time we allow anything to cloud our relationship to God: listening to the deceptive voice of false teachers; giving in to the lustful desires of the flesh; becoming spiritually lazy; or by willful disobedience to God’s Word.

Apostasy often comes by listening to false teachers (Jude 4, 10). As someone has aptly observed, “False teachers have

a destructive influence on others.” In 2 Peter 2:1-3 we read: *“But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious (shameful, sensuous) ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not.”* Second Timothy 4:3, 4 expands this further: *“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.”* False teachers bring in “damnable heresies” and lead often unsuspecting souls away from the truth. Average church members usually put confidence in their leaders, and when leaders fail, those who have put confidence in them are in danger of abandoning faith and becoming apostate.

I offer several examples from the Mennonite Church which should give cause for concern: A prayer offered by a woman pastor which began, “Dear Heavenly Person.” On the issue of homosexuality: in the past churches have been put out of their respective Conferences for accepting homosexuals as members. Now argument is being made for their acceptance as full-standing members, their deviancy being looked upon as an alternate lifestyle, or an entrapment which they did not bring upon themselves and which they have no power to change. It is not abhorred as the gross sin as the Scripture describes it. One Mennonite Church document allows for active duty military personnel to become members without renouncing their military

commitments. A Mennonite pastor in conversation with a member of another Mennonite Church said, "You will be judged for not allowing remarried people into your fellowship."

One Mennonite Church leader told of a meeting in which he was involved some years ago. Two individuals, a man and a woman, were making a strong case for accepting the role of women in ministry. The moderator heard them both out, then responded, "But what about the Bible?" Yes, what about the Bible? Sadly, it is no longer authoritative in the decision-making role in the church as it once was. Or else interpretation has been skewed from the conclusions of many former godly and careful biblical scholars to one of adaptation to current humanistic thinking and rationalizations.

Need we say more? Look around at the evidences of persons having given heed to teachers of false doctrine. In the Mennonite Church, as well as other evangelical churches today, it seems that no longer are the Holy Scriptures the norm for decision-making, but that a spirit of accommodation and relevance has set in. Scriptural teaching is being ignored for the rationalizations of man. Where does it lead? Where will it end? Daniel Kauffman in *Doctrines of the Bible*, in a chapter on the Second Coming of Christ (page 582), writes: "That day shall not come, except there come a falling way first" (2 Thessalonians 2:3). Is there any one that doubts that that day is here? Fundamentalists tell of the present day apostasy, and warn the people. . . . The same things that . . . (were) formerly preached as being against Christianity are now being handed out over the pulpit in the name of religion, and even . . . rank atheism . . . finds its echoes in some churches. With many of the great institutions of learning becoming centers of liberalism, many churches captured by this wave of unbelief, and atheism rapidly on the

increase, we are approaching conditions referred to in the . . . warning voice of Jesus: 'When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth' (Luke 18:8)? No amount of blind optimism can hide the fact that present conditions are accurately portrayed in the language of the prophetic writers." This was written well over 50 years ago. Conditions have certainly worsened since.

Apostasy also happens by following the desires of the flesh, doing what pleases the flesh, following dissolute, lawless, unrestrained passions. (See Jude 4, 8, 15-19.) Romans 1:18-32 shows how low humanity can sink when they deny God's power in their lives. Immorality, idolatry, debauchery, all result from following the lusts of the flesh. Since these ungodly people did not wish to retain the knowledge of God, He gave them over to their vile sins. They became devoid of moral restraints and thus completely separated from a holy God and ripe for judgment.

Are the effects of lawless, licentious living evident today? Ours is a pleasure-seeking world. Men love pleasure more than they love God (2 Timothy 3:4). Immorality is rampant. Half of all marriages end in divorce, one third of all births are to unwed mothers, couples live together without benefit of marriage, and change partners at will, alcoholic beverages have all but become the national drink, sports are the obsession of the masses. The modern man's creed seems to be: "If it feels good, do it!" The focus is on the moment and whatever immediate pleasures can be derived therefrom. There is little thought given to consequences. And, sadly, much of this thinking has found its way into the life of members of the church.

But beware. The person who follows his unbridled passion walks the opposite way from God. They turn their backs on Him, rejecting His principles of disciplined, holy living. They become

their own master. They are estranged from God. They are on a downward path, heading straight for judgment and eternal separation from God. They will be judged by a holy God. They cannot escape the consequences of their choices and actions.

Another area of deception is that of asking God for some special or new revelation on an already clear scriptural teaching. This usually happens when one is simply seeking an excuse to avoid its observance. This is dangerous. It opens up an area where Satan can easily gain a foothold and lead one ever further away from a practical, balanced and submissive biblical position. Observe a compromising person's life. What will they begin to rationalize away next? Where will they be in relation to clear biblical teaching and application five, ten, or twenty years down the road? Once the pattern is set, there's no easy stopping point. Cannot we say, at least, that deception has evidently gained a foothold in that person's life and, if not checked, it can lead to spiritual ruin? It is dangerous to trifle with God's holy will and word.

Apostasy also happens through spiritual apathy (laziness). Jude says (verse 5), "*I will put you in remembrance,*" warning his readers against spiritual passivity and reminding his readers of God's judgment on those who turn away from Him, neglecting to maintain a close relationship with the Lord. Paul encourages Timothy to "*fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life*" (1 Timothy 6:12). (See also 1 Timothy 1:18-20.) It is of utmost importance to maintain a vital relationship with the Lord Jesus daily so we do not fall from faith through neglect or indifference. A vital faith requires constant attention and effort.

The Christian life is a warfare, a continual struggle against sin and apathy, a constant battle to maintain faith in the face of temptation. To yield ground is to

go down in defeat and open oneself to the lure of false teachers, the lusts of the old nature, and thus the potential for apostasy. Neglect is perhaps our most vulnerable area. It is so easy to allow the cares of this world, the deceitful pursuit of riches, or other temporal things to replace the pursuit of God in our lives. And gradually we cool off, begin to rationalize, and move away from an intimate relationship with Jesus. We are then on a dangerously slippery slope, ripe for spiritual failure.

Jude gives us the antidote in verse 3 where he encourages his readers to "*earnestly contend (struggle) for the faith.*" Apostasy happens through willful or neglectful disobedience to God's truth, which usually starts with something small and then, once the bond has been broken between the soul and God, it becomes easier to simply and openly disobey Him and His commandments. King Saul provides a frightening example of such disobedience. (See 1 Samuel 13:13a and 15:17-22.) Continual commitment to obedience and a willing practice of the principles of God's Word are vital safeguards against the slide into apostasy.

Obedience is the ultimate test of loyalty. If you truly love God, you will obey Him. In obeying Him a bond of fellowship is created which nurtures your faith and stabilizes your soul. Disobedience, on the other hand, estranges one from God and sets one up for the ultimate denial of His goodness and provision for salvation and holy living. Disobedience separates one from God. A person who takes his own way, contrary to God's revealed truth, becomes a law to himself and, unless he seeks repentance, forgiveness, and restoration, faces the wrath of God's eternal judgment. Disobedience leads to a total rejection of God and His way of life—ultimate apostasy.

Apostasy can be insidious, creeping in unannounced on the tongue of a false

teacher. It may also come through an unrestrained desire to live according to the passions of the flesh. It may come simply through neglect of one's spiritual life. However it comes, the end result of apostasy is blatant rejection of God and His principles as life's defining guidelines. It is saying, in effect, "I will take my chances on my own, I have no need of God." It happens in various ways for various people or groups, and in different ways in different eras of time. But the bottom line is that apostasy always happens through deception or carelessness. It is subtle, coming in unawares and unannounced. Can it be reversed? Can it be avoided? Read on.

Apostasy: How to Avoid It

"But ye beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life" (Jude 20, 21).

The Mennonite Church wasn't always like it is today, and it didn't get that way overnight. What has happened? Just how did it get to this point? Who is responsible? Where will it all end? What can we expect next? More importantly, how does God view all that is taking place today in a church which calls him Lord? Are there evidences of apostasy, or not? What does it mean anymore to be a Mennonite? And, how can those who seek to maintain a biblically conservative view avoid departure from what we now accept and believe?

If a person or group persists in sin, God finally gives them over to the continual practice of sin. Romans 1:24: "Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness." Romans 1:26: "For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections." Romans 1:28: "And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not decent." Sin begets sin

and, eventually, God allows sinning people to go their own sinful way. This is the tragic consequence of apostasy, the willful departure from God's truth, setting oneself up for the judgment of God.

The result of following one's own way is estrangement from God, His mercy and His grace. Genesis 6:3 warns: "*And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man.*" When God abandons those who rebel, that person, or group, continues to go further and further from God and His guiding principles, sinking deeper and deeper into sensual indulgences, human rationalization, and depravity. Second Timothy 3:13 tells us that "*evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.*" Persons turning away from God and following their own desires fill the spiritual void in their lives with sensual pleasures and emotional experiences that block sensitivity to God's Spirit, and leaves them helpless and all but hopeless. Hebrews 6:4-6 says: "*For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.*" There is only one way to salvation, obedience to God's laws. God will not be mocked. Those who turn away from His offer of grace and live in disobedience to His Word must suffer the consequences.

God does not look lightly upon sin, and the one who persists in disobedience will ultimately be judged by Him. The consequences of departure from God's principles in this life will result in eternal alienation from Him who is too holy to look upon sin. The picture of eternal judgment is harsh. Mark 9:43-50 reminds the reader again and again that hell is a place where the fire of

God's wrath will never be quenched. Persons who end up there will suffer eternal agony—of body and soul. Ultimately, God's wrath will be poured out upon those who reject Him. (See also Hebrews 10:29-31.)

Satan's deception keeps people, and churches, from seeing the horrible end result of their refusal to follow God's will. God has made us creatures of choice and He has also spelled out the consequences of our choices, both good and bad. But it seems human tendency is to overlook the negative aspects of failure to choose what is good. Eternity is forever and judgment is harsh and unrelenting for those who reject God's means of salvation and the disciplined, holy life which must follow. We can only conclude that Satan has blinded their eyes to the truth of God's Word. It becomes a tragedy of eternal proportions.

What are the long-range effects of apostasy? What happens to subsequent generations when apostasy sets in? The answer is self-evident. They become a mission field. I wondered as I read the account of a large Mennonite gathering where such non-traditional things as dancing and cartwheels on the convention floor were a supposed form of worship response. Was there no one among those 8,000 gathered Mennonites who had serious questions about what was taking place? No one who would dare to stand up and say, "Hey, wait a minute, this just isn't right"? What are the consequences for the Mennonite Church in light of what is currently taking place; the obvious departure from its basic scriptural moorings, from its historical positions, and its subsequent accommodation to human reasonings and loss of its distinctive position as a separated body of believers? I wonder.

How can apostasy be avoided? To paraphrase Thomas Jefferson: "Eternal vigilance is the price of victory." There is no substitute for continual spiritual

endeavor. Let's look at three passages of Scripture that point this out. First, Hebrews 10:22-25. This passage lists four essentials to combating apostasy. Verse 22—Draw near to God with a sincere and pure heart. That speaks of a vital personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 23—Hold fast to your faith. Jude says, "*earnestly contend (struggle) for the faith.*" Stability is the key here. Verse 24—Consider, or encourage one another. Mutual encouragement and spiritual stimulation are essential to maintaining faith. We need each other, and we are responsible for one another. Verse 25—Meet together for exhortation, encouragement, and edification. Worship, fellowship, and teaching are all essential to combating apostasy. The neglect of any carries negative potential for believers.

Secondly, in Hebrews 3:12-19 we again have the personal warning in verse 12 to, "take heed." In verse 13 we notice the responsibility we carry for one another where the command is to "exhort one another daily." In verse 14, and following, we notice the seriousness of losing out, of not being faithful to the end. God prohibits those from entering into His eternal rest who are not faithful to Him to the end of life. It's a solemn warning. Remember that the children of Israel perished in the wilderness because of their refusal to enter the land of their promised rest. They disobeyed God, they lost His guidance, they suffered, they died.

The third passage is 2 Peter 3:17, 18: "*Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*" As one commentator explains these verses: "Be continually increasing in grace and knowledge to counteract false teachings." Again, we have the warning "beware" and the

encouragement, “grow.” Matthew Henry said, “Spiritual growth is the surest way to prevent apostasy from the faith.” We should rivet that fact in our minds.

These warnings are practical. Anything in any area of life that robs one of intimate fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ carries the potential to lead into apostasy, whether it be pleasure-seeking, work-aholism, misplaced values, secularism, compromise with worldly principles, materialism, carelessness, obsession with sports, etc. We need to be honest with ourselves. We need to come honestly and openly before God and ask, “Is there anything in my life that I have allowed to come between me and my relationship with Jesus?” If so, correct it before it is too late, before it leads to ever further departure from God and His principles and ultimate spiritual ruin.

The most effective antidote to apostasy can be summed up in a few short words: A continual close walk with God. Jude 20 and 21 encourages the building up of oneself in the faith. *Build* upon the foundation you have laid on Jesus Christ. *Grow* in your knowledge of God. *Pray* in the Holy Spirit. Prayer has been described as the “nurse of faith.” Make it a daily habit. Keep yourself in the love of God. Stay tuned to His voice and direction. Look eagerly for the ultimate consummation of your salvation when Jesus will return to usher you into His eternal kingdom. And trust in God’s ability to save and keep you until that time (Jude 24, 25). He alone is able to keep us from falling. He alone is able to present us faultless before His glorious presence. His joy is in our victory and ultimate triumph. To Him be glory, majesty, dominion, and power—now and forevermore. Praise Him!

Summary

As we have examined this subject of apostasy, its causes and effects, we con-

clude that the consequences of a departure from the faith are almost too staggering to contemplate, both for time and for eternity. Certainly, we want to be alert and on guard against it once we understand the ultimate ruin it can bring in the life of an individual or church. Can *I* avoid it? Can *we* avoid it? Yes, by maintaining a vital, personal, daily walk with the Lord Jesus Christ, and by being constantly alert to trends that would lead us away from a sound, biblical application of New Testament principles as a church. The responsibility is mine, and it is yours. Only God, in His mercy, is able to keep us from falling, and to ultimately present us without fault before His glorious presence. But He is able to perfect His will in us only as we are willing and as we live in obedience to Him.

Peter admonishes us to: “*Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*” (2 Peter 3:18). He also says in 3:14: “*Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things (see context), be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless.*” The responsibility for faithfulness rests upon each of us. We must be alert to those things which would call us away from God, and be continually diligent to maintain our relationship to Him. Only then can we escape the damning influences which lead to apostasy and eternal ruin.

Will you stand in renewed commitment to maintaining the faith “once delivered to the saints”? Therein alone is our hope of eternal life.

“*Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.*” ■



LIBERTY Only in Truth

by Dr. John Hall (1829-1898)

“And I will walk at liberty: for I seek thy precepts” (Psalm 119:45).

God is the Governor of this world. Some may say this is a very elementary truth. Even so, there have been long ages in the history of our race when that truth was not accepted and when the most intelligent of our race believed something directly opposed. There have been multitudes of men, for example, who believed like Aristotle, that matter is eternal. There are multitudes still who believe that in some way or other nature governs itself. There is a large class of thinkers who, without taking the name to themselves, are practically pantheists, and, like Spinoza and Fichte and Hegel, persuade themselves that all is God, as they express it, and that God is all. You do not need to be told that the earlier portion of the Old Testament Scriptures God has given to us that we might have these illusions banished, and that we might be made to know that God is the Creator and the Ruler of all things; that He is not nature, and nature is not God; that He is not to be confounded with the works of His hands; that He is a distinct, personal and holy Being, who has created all, and who has a right, on the ground of creation, even if there were no other, to be the Ruler of all. It took long to make men understand this truth, simple and elementary as it seems to you and to me.

When we say that God governs the globe, we do not mean the mere earthly, solid structure on which we dwell. We mean that He governs the inhabitants of it, the communities and the individuals.

“The Lord reigneth, let the earth rejoice.” “The Lord reigneth, let the nations tremble.” “He raiseth up kings and He putteth them down.” He calls into being Pharaohs that He may show His power and His glory in relation to them. His providence is most holy and wise and powerful, and it is not general merely; it is particular, extending to all the creatures and to all their actions. These things we have to keep in mind in relation to Jehovah.

Common Sense

God has spoken to us. What shall we do with His Word? Shall we neglect it, or shall we take it, study it, seek it and make it the rule of our lives?

Now, it would seem, surely, that if a man believed this, his common sense would dictate to him that, living in a world that God had made and God rules in every detail, if he wishes to be happy in it, he must have respect to the law of Him who has made and who rules. Common sense indicates that if we live in a house it is desirable to be on good terms with the head of the house if we wish to be comfortable. Common sense dictates that if a man is in the employment of others, it is wise for him to have a right understanding, to stand well with the head of the department in which he is engaged. Common sense teaches us that if we are subjects in a kingdom and wish to be safe and happy, we must respect the laws by which the kingdom is ruled. And we have only to extend this principle, and we get to the point that was before the psalmist's mind when he says: “I will walk at liberty: for I seek [or “have sought”] thy precepts.” I am living in Thy world; I am dependent upon Thee; I have taken pains

to know what Thy will is, that I may do it and so, as a result, I walk at liberty. That is the idea that is brought to us in the text, and it is easy for you to see how good and practical that idea actually is.

But the question may arise: Can we know the precepts and the statutes that God has given to us? You do not need to be told that that is within our reach. God has spoken to us in this revelation, as He did speak less articulately in the works of His hands and in the instincts and convictions that He produced in our spirit. We have His revelation, the Bible, in our hands. We can seek the knowledge of it. In many instances well-meaning and right-minded boys, under great difficulties, have sought education that they may get on in this world. In many other cases boys have had education at their very doors, and have never sought it, and consequently have been of little account in the world. Now the difference is not great, in this aspect of it, between ordinary secular education and the spiritual education of which the text gives us an illustration. Here are God's statutes and precepts put within our reach. We can search them, seek them, know them and do them, by the grace that God is willing to give; or we can push them aside, ignore and disregard them, and take our own way, and the result will be absolute and everlasting failure in our lives. We cannot have this too solemnly fixed in our thoughts. God has spoken to us. What shall we do with His Word? Shall we neglect it and pass it by, or shall we take, study it, seek it, as the verse expresses it, and make it the rule of our lives?

Jesus Christ has come down from heaven to live among us and has said to our race, "Come unto Me and learn of Me"; and there are millions to whom this message has come, and they disregard and ignore it. They do not come to Him; they do not learn of Him. Can we wonder if the Judge should say to them when they appear at His seat, "I never knew you"? If you read the Second Epistle to the Thes-

salonians, you will see pictures of an angry God, as an avenging fire, in the apostle's description. On whom does the fire fall? On whom does the Judge show his indignation? Is it upon the misers and the miscreants and the murderers of the race merely? Oh, no. It is upon them that "know not God and obey not the Gospel of His Son." Is it any wonder that the sacred writer should say, "Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth"; not merely remember that there is a God—remember thy Creator, who made thee and in whose hand thy fortunes are. Remember in the days of thy youth, the formative days, the days when character is being shaped. What is well begun is half ended. The life that is begun in this way has a guarantee of usefulness and success. The life that is not begun in this way has a dark and gloomy prospect before it. Remember thy Creator. We all know well what is meant when someone says to us, on going away from our homes, "Don't forget your home; don't forget your mother." We know what that means. And God's messenger speaks to us in the same tone when he makes this appeal: Remember thy Creator; remember His power, remember His will, remember His statutes, seek His precepts, and by doing this thou wilt be able to walk at liberty.

Liberty Is Not Light

You may have mere liberty, and not light and not the liberty of God. You may combine liberty with means, with power and with a certain degree of prosperity; you may combine it with equality and with fraternity and yet not have the true enlightenment. True enlightenment comes in the way, indicated in the text, by the seeking of God's precepts, the knowing of God's statutes, and this you and I need to keep in mind.

"What is liberty?" once asked Burke. "What is liberty without wisdom and without virtue? Such liberty is the greatest of all possible evils, for it is vice and folly and madness, without tuition and

without restraint.” Mere liberty without other forces working in the sphere that it opens up, is only another name for license. “Give me liberty or give me death,” said Patrick Henry—not because he felt the need of enlightenment. He had been enlightened by the teaching of an intelligent Scottish father, by the preaching of the splendid sermons of Samuel Davies and especially by the daily study, which he kept up to his dying day, of his Bible. He had been enlightened by these things. What he craved for himself and for his fellowmen was open space in which, unhindered, other and mighty influences might tell upon his fellowmen and make the country what, in the blessing of God, it has become. Settle this in your minds: Liberty is simply the freedom for other forces to act, and it is for you and me who are free, to see what these forces are, and we never can have any so good as those which the psalmist speaks of when he says that he sought God’s precepts, he studied God’s statutes, that he might do them and so walk at liberty.

We want to walk at liberty. How can we do it? If we do not thus walk at liberty, there is only one alternative—stay in bondage and walk in bondage, moving about indeed, and apparently free, but with moral chains binding our natures and our whole being in bondage to the powers that will rejoice in our misery and ultimate ruin. It is to make men understand this that we have such institutions as we enjoy today. For this end church edifices are reared. For this end people are invited to come and be regularly in them and under their influence. For this end God has given us the day of holy rest. For this purpose the ministry has been instituted.

Our business is to make men seek and know God’s precepts and statutes, that they may do them and that they may walk at liberty. We ministers are for you; our business is to seek your moral and spiritual good, your full and complete liberation. Our business is to enlighten you

with the truth as God has been pleased to reveal it unto us. You do not come to these churches for our sakes, to hear us. You do not give your money that we may be sustained and upheld. I tell you I would rather sweep the streets, I would rather carry bricks on my shoulder to the builder, than to be a mere official person maintained because he can teach so much and get so many people to hear him. Brethren, it is that you may be enlightened and saved with the light of life, that God has brought us into the position in which we are now together. Keep this in your thoughts; and that you may be enlightened and free, look upward and not downward, nor around you. In that statue in our harbor, the light that will shine is light that comes, I suppose, from the heart of the earth; but the light that is to enlighten the world is the light of the sun, the Sun of Righteousness. See that you have that shining into your souls, that you may walk at liberty.

The Ultimate Purpose

Having looked at the former part of this text, namely, what the psalmist did with a view to the end, we look at the end at which he was aiming. He studied God’s Word, not simply that he might have so much intellectual knowledge. He studied it for practical uses. He studied God’s precepts that He might obey them. I do not need to remind you that we have advantages greater than he had, in some important respects. He had the revelation in part; we have it in its completeness. He had the preparatory dispensation; we have the dispensation that fulfills the promises of the preparatory. He had the beginning; we have the complement. We know more than he did. He wrote these words: “I have sought thy precepts.” He knew of the Paschal Lamb and of its typical significance; we know the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. He knew the Hebrew priest and the general character of his functions. We know a High Priest who has passed into the

heavens—Jesus, the Son of God. He knew of the altar and the victim, and the blood that made typical atonement; we know of the great sacrifice on the cross, bringing in a redemption that is complete and eternal. He knew of a Messiah that was to come. You know of that Messiah risen, risen triumphant, risen a conqueror, risen for you, risen because He finished the work God gave Him to do. If the psalmist studied God's will that he might walk at liberty, how much greater is the obligation upon us to do the same, and how much greater our facilities and our encouragement. Let us try, then, to travel in the psalmist's steps, and let us see some, not all, of the forms of liberty that we can have by compliance with the divine precepts.

There is liberty, in the first place, from the world. I use the word now in the sense in which it is used so frequently in the Bible—not merely this round globe or the hundreds of millions that are upon it—not merely these millions in that capacity. The world lieth in the wicked one; the mass of men, that is, do not know God. They constitute the world of the New Testament; we can be in bondage to this world. Natural men are in bondage to it. They are not at liberty in relation to that natural world. It is without God; it does not ask what His will is. It enquires as to its own will, and it tries to enforce it. You sometimes see cliques and coteries and collections of men insisting at any cost upon carrying out their own will. This is only the spirit of the greater world of which they constitute a section. Sometimes men are in bondage to the world in this sense, and the mainspring of their life is to stand well with it, to do what their set, their society, the world round about them, wishes them to do. Sometimes the bondage is aggravated by another feature, viz., the effort to rise higher, to get upon a more elevated plane, to get into another

Our business is to make men seek and know God's precepts and statutes, that they may do them and that they may walk at liberty.

set; and, oh, how aggravated is the bondage under which many thus live and labor! Freedom from that is obtained when we walk according to God's statutes. Believers, the world is not your master. One is your Master, even Christ, and we are brethren in Him, and He is reasonable and kind and just and brotherly, and you can walk with Him. His favor is enough for you. His smile satisfies you. Fellowship with Him is the best society. Let society stigmatize you; let it stamp its enmity upon you, but seek God's precepts. If you only have Christ walking with you, then you walk at liberty. But as to the lifework in which many are busy, or trying to get up a little higher socially, take this precept of the Word: "Godliness with contentment is great gain"; and these things, the godliness with the contentment, will break these clanking chains of insane and stupid ambition and will prepare you to walk at liberty. "I am in the place where God puts me. I am trying to do the work that God gives to me. I am responsible to Him. I belong to Him. He is my Father; Christ is my Brother; heaven is my home. This I believe on the authority of His Word. I will walk at liberty." Let me commend that form of true freedom to you.

The World's Bad Ways

There is liberty, in the second place, from bad ways. Do I need to describe these bad ways to you? You cannot live in the city, you cannot read the newspapers, you cannot hear the gossip, you cannot know what is going on in the circles in which you mingle, without knowing some of these bad ways. There is the lover of this world's possessions, so strongly denounced in Isaiah's prophecies: beginning, perhaps, with necessary saving, but coming slowly but steadily to a sordid love of the thing that is saved till the whole spirit is mercenary, and gold is the deity

that is practically worshiped. There is the drunkard, sipping a little innocently, as he thinks, at the beginning, then going a little farther, and secretly, until shame is lost and the victim is under the power of the drink—degraded, wretched, irresponsible, not ashamed of himself, for shame is gone, but an object for which all are ashamed that are connected with him. There is the gambler, beginning perhaps with what he deemed innocent recreation, and catching the spirit of the thing till it masters him, until he flings away all that he has, and all that he hopes to have, in the chance of recovering something already lost, till life is a burden and fortune is gone and suicide is perhaps the tragic termination.

These are specimens of the bad ways—marked specimens, I grant, but still simple specimens. There is freedom from this when we seek and do God’s statutes—real freedom. We learn to walk circumspectly; we learn to keep the heart with all diligence; we learn to hate evil and do good; we learn to flee from the snares that Satan sets for the feet of men. We walk securely, for we have been taught of the Spirit to walk with God. Make sure, dear hearers, that you have this liberty.

There is liberty from bad memories—bad, putrid memories. When the corrupt imagination contemplates indulgence in sin, it often dwells upon these long before the actual execution of them, and as they linger in the mind they photograph themselves upon its surface and they stay there. There may be compunction for the sin, there may be shame over it, there may be vows against it, there may be honest purposes to resist and overcome it, and these purposes to a good degree carried out; but the horrid, poisonous memories remain in the soul. You know what it is to be in a house where animal matter is decaying and poisoning fumes are being scattered up and down. Oh! The misery of the human mind that is haunted with the ghosts of bad deeds that have been done in the past. It is bondage of the keenest

and sorest kind. There is liberty from these to those who walk in God’s statutes, liberty that can be had nowhere else. “A new heart will I give you, and a right spirit will I put within you. I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh.” Happy are they to whom this word was fulfilled in their early youth, and who in consequence were kept from the sins, the very recollection of which is sometimes like the beginning of hell.

Sinful Bondage

There is bondage to bad associates and bad associations. In how many instances, in thoughtlessness, inexperience, under the impulses of mere feeling, do men become entangled in connections that mar their lives and spoil all their happiness—make happiness practically impossible! I speak what I know when I say that there are too many cases in which boys are practically ruined when they go as pupils to schools away from their parents’ supervision, thrown into dependence, in some degree, upon those whom they call friends, and these friends bad, initiating them into ways and habits and modes of thinking and doing for which they only want the liberty of later years that they may put them into practice, with disgrace, misery, and ruin. Relief from this bondage, escape from it—these can be had when we seek God’s statutes, when we walk according to His precepts. Wisdom’s ways are pleasantness, and her paths are peace. There are no bad habits in them; there are no entangling associations in them; there are no corrupting and degrading influences in them. There is nothing in them that plays upon passion, till passion, once our idol and our sport, becomes our ruler and our cruel tyrant. To escape all these, this is the way: seek God’s statutes, that you may know and do them, and you shall walk at liberty. ■

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete. Paul M. Emerson, Editor

Another Christmas

Again they peal, the wistful Yuletide chimes,
Amid the jarring clang of changing times;
The angel songs float down through history—
God born as Man!—time's super-mystery!
Sad marvel: millions hear without surprise
The biggest news which ever clove the skies!

Again they play, the children with their toys,
Gay parties draw the older girls and boys;
Regathered families hail the festive day,
And jovial revellers their gifts display:
How strange!—how almost inconceivable,
So few receive Heaven's "Gift Unspeakable"!

Yet none the less, as carol strains resound,
Adoring hearts will everywhere be found;
The throne-room of the soul they will prepare,
To give the Saviour-King new welcome there:
And He will see, and say with gentle smile,
"The nails and thorny-crown were all worthwhile."

— J. Sidlow Baxter