

# What God Wants From a Church

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## Preface

The author of this article is a church pastor. One of the purposes in writing this was to explain to those interested in the church certain issues that he believes are important to God and the reasons why. Much of the content affects how the Christian life is to be lived; the article then becomes a standard for principles he needs to apply to his own life in his own relationship with the Lord. This then becomes a basis for teaching the principles to others in the church, both by example and from the pulpit.

There is another major concern addressed in the content. It appears that most churches today have drifted from the simple faith once delivered to the saints. A primary purpose of The Rock Baptist Church is to provide an assembly for those believers who desire a return back to Biblical principles in church practice. Various issues of concern are addressed as well as the reasons for the concern. It is the desire that this article may serve as a guideline for those who are looking for a church which is striving to be faithful to God in an age of compromise. May God be glorified as we seek to understand His Word, believe it, and correctly apply it to our lives!

## 1. The Importance of Belief

As one reads through the Bible, he will find a pattern that begins in Genesis, the first book, and then continues throughout the rest of the Bible up to and including Revelation, the last book. Specifically, God is pleased with those who believe His Word. On the contrary, there is not a single instance recorded where He was pleased with someone who did not believe what He said. This is important, because we will frequently convince ourselves that we have a particular situation that is unique and somehow is exempt from what God has revealed. We tell ourselves that we are better off if we do things our way than His way. We try to convince ourselves that we do not really need to believe and practice what He has revealed. However, this is a lie. God's way is truly best.

Even believers can be tempted to place their wisdom above God's. Therefore, we need to remember two things:

1) Proverbs 21:30 tells us that there is no wisdom or understanding or counsel against the Lord. If we think we have come up with a truth that shows that we are smarter or have more insight than God, we deceive ourselves and are wrong! Period! God created the universe out of nothing. In the process He placed every atom and every molecule exactly where He wanted it. He designed the laws of nature that we study in science. He understands the end from the beginning. He is actively involved in its ongoing activity. There is nothing we can teach Him. Instead, we should be in awe at His unfathomable intelligence, understanding, and wisdom. This awe should result in belief and obedience.

Believing in God as the Creator is the first step to coming to know Him personally and is the foundation for everything that follows in the Christian life. If a person struggles with what God has told us in the early chapters of Genesis, he will struggle with everything that follows.

2) God observes our reaction and our response to what His word says. If we believe Him, there will be some kind of blessing. If we do not, there will be some kind of penalty. Willingness to respond in faith and action to what God reveals to us is the starting point of true service to Him.

## 2. God is absolute in His holiness.

The starting point of any and all relationships with God is to recognize that God is a holy God. Moreover, He is absolute in His holiness. Of all His attributes, holiness is the most foundational. He has revealed in the Bible that His holiness is never compromised. This is a foundational quality of His character and He cannot deny Himself. Most Christians will readily acknowledge words that say "God is holy." They may even be familiar with 1 Peter 1:15-16, which reads,

"...but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'"

It sounds so pious to quote these words. Yet, understanding them and applying them to the decisions we make is another story altogether. Few modern day pastors or those in the congregations seem to understand the absolute nature Scripture reveals about God's holiness. This is foundationally important. To stress its importance, we will look at four examples from Scripture where people misunderstood what God wanted with disastrous consequences.

**i. Cain.** Cain makes a good illustration of God's absolute holiness. Cain offered God a sacrifice. It cost him something for the offering. He was a farmer and offered a portion of his produce to God. He worked by the sweat of his brow to acquire the grain for the offering. Sweat was required because of the curse in Genesis 3:17-19.

However, God had revealed that He wanted a blood offering from a clean animal. Cain decided that that would not be necessary, that a grain offering would be adequate—after all he was still serving and worshiping God. God's response to Cain's tainted offering demonstrates an important lesson to us. God rejected **in total** Cain's efforts to please Him. God gave Cain zero credit for what good he may have appeared to do. Cain was infuriated with God's rejection of the offering. Yet, Cain's anger only confirmed that God was correct in His valuation. There was a heart problem that Cain was attempting to cover—he was not truly concerned about what God wanted. Cain wanted to be the one to set the standards as opposed to letting God set them. It is sad to see how many people today continue to copy Cain's example.

Pastors and those in the congregations both need to understand this: God is holy. If someone rejects His instructions about how to do something, it becomes irrelevant about how much good may appear to have been done or what it may have cost to do it. His entire service is at risk of being rejected. This is offensive to our flesh. Nevertheless, disobedience potentially invalidates the service offered Him, independently of what it may have cost us to give it.

If a person's heart is right before God, then accurately finding out what God has revealed concerning a situation should be his first goal. The second is yearning for the grace to be faithful in responding properly to what he learned.

**ii. Aaron's sons.** Leviticus chapter 10 discusses Nadab and Abihu. They were the two oldest of Aaron's four sons; Aaron was the first Chief Priest of the Israelites. God wanted a special incense to be offered as part of the formal worship honoring Him. Nadab and Abihu had the privilege of being the very first priests to make this offering at the time when the Old Testament offerings made their initial debut. God had given very specific instructions how He wanted the offering to take place. However, when these two men made their offering, they followed the procedure to a degree, but not totally accurately. God's response was immediate. He refused to accept their twisted offering and struck both of them dead on the spot. God's holiness had been despised. The offering was not according to what God ordained and He rejected all of it. He also rejected them because of their disobedience to His clear instructions.

Somehow Aaron's remaining two sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, did not get the message. Later that same day they disobeyed the commandment to eat a portion of a certain sacrifice in a holy spot. Moses discovered their disobedience the next day and started to deal with them for their disobedience. Suddenly, a grief-stricken, panic-stricken Aaron pleaded for them that they

had essentially obeyed the command. In response to Aaron's pleas, Moses did not pursue the matter any further. Aaron feared he was about to have all four of his sons destroyed by their sloppiness in service on the very first day the offerings were initiated. This should be a message to us about the dangers of taking lightly God's revealed instructions, despising His holiness as we do so.

**iii. Uzzah.** Uzzah was a man in the wrong place at the wrong time with a wrong perception of what God wanted. David the King was bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. However, it was not being done in accordance with God's instructions. God gave an edict that the ark was to be carried on foot by certain people called *Levites* using special poles inserted into rings mounted onto the sides of the ark. Instead, David had the Ark placed on a cart drawn by oxen (2 Samuel 6:2-15). Uzzah was one of the cart's drivers. The oxen stumbled, the cart started to tip, Uzzah grabbed the Ark to prevent it from falling, and God struck Uzzah dead on the spot for His sin. It was irrelevant that Uzzah was trying to prevent damage to the Ark. He was not a priest and therefore he was not allowed to touch the Ark under penalty of death—even the Levites who carried the ark were specifically forbidden to touch it while they were carrying it under penalty of death, since they were not priests (Numbers 4:15).

This is important: God expected anyone involved with the Ark to know and follow His instructions concerning how to deal with it. When God killed Uzzah, David was initially angry as well as fearful. However, Uzzah's death gave David a new respect for God's holiness. He learned a valuable, if expensive, lesson. Eventually, David understood that ignorance was not an excuse, discovered his error, and ordered that Levites carry the Ark in the manner God had commanded in Scripture. David was apparently still apprehensive about having anything to do with the Ark, perhaps worrying that he might have overlooked yet something else. Nonetheless, he knew the Ark needed to be taken to its proper destination, so he did need to make another attempt. Once the Levites had walked the first six steps, taking them in accordance with God's instructions, and were not struck dead like Uzzah, David and the large crowd with him broke out into exuberant shouts of praise as they worshiped God.

1 Chronicles 15:1-28 goes into more detail about the incident. In verse 13 David explained why Uzzah was killed: "the LORD our God broke out against us, because we did not consult Him about the proper order." God's holiness is absolute. If there is something we can find out by making a proper Scriptural analysis, then ignorance is not an excuse. This needs to be taken seriously by those of the church today. It appears that grace has frequently been turned to license. The attitude of many seems to be that since Christ paid the penalty for our sins, we can do whatever seems right to us. We do not need to worry about the details in how we serve God. "As long as my heart is right, God will overlook my ignorance." In truth a person who is willfully ignorant does not have a heart that is right.

**iv. Ananias and Sapphira.** There is another illustration of God's holiness in Acts 5:1-11. This event is particularly relevant, because it took place in our age, that of grace and the church. A man name Ananias and his wife Sapphira owned some land. They sold it and gave most of the money to the church, but held a portion back for themselves. However, they deliberately gave the impression that they offered the entire proceeds of the sale to the church. God was displeased with their deceit; in fact He was so displeased that He killed both of them on the spot in a

dramatic manner. Note, the church benefitted a lot from their gift. It cost Ananias and Sapphira a lot financially. Scripture tells us that they had the right to keep for themselves however much they wanted. However, from God's perspective the sin of their lie overshadowed the goodness of their gift. He struck them dead for their sin.

I can speculate that the church's attitude was, "God, send us more sinners like this. We need the money and they didn't keep back that much of it." However, God's holiness was offended—they had lied to the Holy Spirit—and from His perspective their sin overshadowed their gift. What was the end result of God's judgment? The passage concludes in Acts 5:11 with the statement, "So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things." In His grace God may have sent Christ to die for our sins. However, He is still holy and still expects us to honor that holiness in our service. The fear of the Lord is still the beginning of wisdom. Scripture shows us that there is a necessary place in the life of a believer for fearing the Holiness of God. Even believers need to fear the consequences of transgressing His holiness. (See Acts 9:31, Romans 11:20, 2 Corinthians 7:1, Ephesians 5:21, Philippians 2:12-13, Hebrews 12:28-29, 1 Peter 1:17-19, 2:17.)

We need to remember that God sets His own standards. He expects us to make diligent effort to find out what He wants. Failure to do this can result in severe loss. For the unsaved person at the Great White Throne Judgment, his reasons for believing or not believing are completely irrelevant. If he gets the Gospel wrong, he ends up in Hell for eternity. Concerning the believer, God decrees that works done contrary to His revealed will are nothing more than wood, hay, and stubble to be burned. All of our efforts that went into such works will be decreed a waste. We have the responsibility to find out what His standards are and submit to them. I fear that far too many preachers and church members of today do not want to understand this responsibility and do not want to apply it to their approach to live out the Christian life. It is as though they hope that ignorance will excuse disobedience. Scripture teaches otherwise—willful ignorance is a serious offense in itself.

In our fallen nature, we are similar to Cain. We want to decree to God that He should be pleased with whatever we decide to give Him. We want to determine in our own hearts what gives the best result and expect God to receive it. We do not want to understand that God's holiness prevents Him from receiving anything contrary to His revealed will. Cain became angry when confronted with his error. I have experienced this same anger, though not to the extent Abel did (I am still alive), when on occasion I have tried to bring these kinds of issues to the attention of others, both to church leaders and to those in the flocks. God's holiness is offensive to our fallen nature. It is only the work of the Holy Spirit in our heart that gives us the power to overcome this.

It is only after we understand the absolute nature of God's holiness that we can appreciate the overwhelming depth of His love for us. The Father and the Son both loved us so much that the Son was made sin for us as He hung on the cross. This was pure grace; there was absolutely nothing we could or can do to justify this love. When we remember the absolute nature of God's holiness, we should be overwhelmed by the love Christ demonstrated at the cross. May the following words found in Romans 5:28 grip our hearts:

"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

### **3. God understands more than we do.**

God is not impressed with any effort on our part to show Him that our way is better than His. This one statement shows the fallacy of the neo-evangelical approach, which has taken over all of current evangelical Christianity with only a few isolated exceptions here and there. This is actually an application of the first point, His holiness.

As an illustration, Promise Keepers is an unbiblical organization for a number of reasons. Even its name demonstrates this. The Christian walk is not one of making promises—this is the way of the flesh. Rather, God’s rule of life for the Christian is to walk by means of the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit will be the natural product of a proper walk with God. I once spoke briefly to a friend of mine who was very active in Promise Keepers and wanted to talk to me about it. I mentioned to him that I had reservations about the organization, including that even its very name was contrary to a number of Biblical principles. His answer was illuminating to me. He said, “Tim, that may be so, but I have seen an awful lot of good come out of Promise Keepers.” His attitude startled me. I had previously respected his walk with the Lord and expected more insight than this. There were all kinds of problems revealed by his words.

First, he indicated that as far as he was concerned, it did not matter whether or not the approach was Biblical; it did not matter if many Biblical principles were being violated even at its foundational core. To him, the apparent good being done outweighed everything else. This man did not understand God’s holiness. He needed to remember Cain. He needed to remember Uzzah. He needed to remember Ananias and Sapphira.

Second, he implied that the methods espoused by Promise Keepers were effective and thus it was good to use them. God was blessing his use of these methods. My friend’s unstated but obvious implication was that God would not bless him as much if He were to use a more Biblical approach. My inward response was, “Whatever blessings you think you are seeing are not as great as you would have seen if you had put the same effort into serving God according to His Word. I also believe that in effect my friend was saying, “God will not bless me if I do things His way, but if I show Him I have discovered a better way than He has revealed in Scripture, then He will be so impressed with my wisdom that He will pour out His blessings.” Of course, the man would never admit this openly. But it was taught by his actions. The man was either deluded or was much more ignorant of Scripture than I had believed Him to be.

We need to remember that God reveals truth to us through His Word and then tests us, observing our response. When we reject His truth because we believe we have a better way, we fail the test. We need to remember the passage quoted and discussed earlier, “There is no wisdom, or counsel, or understanding against the Lord” (Proverbs 21:30). We need to view this verse as foundational in our relationship with God. Anytime we reject something He has revealed in Scripture because we think we have found a better way, we are making a big mistake. We are setting ourselves up for a big fall.

Again, we need to remember who God is. He invented the laws of science, with all of their subtle relationships and interactions. He planned the location of every atom and molecule of

every sun and star and planet in every galaxy in the universe. He understands the end from the beginning. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. His holiness is absolute. Do we truly believe we understand anything better than Him? That is absolutely foolish. Yet, unfortunately, that is the prevailing attitude among many pastors today in “how to do church.”

Perhaps such pastors fear that if they do things Biblically, that they will lose their congregation. That could very well be true—but then the congregation will need to give an account to God for their improper response to a message God wanted them to hear. God has never blessed a false prophet on the basis that he had to preach a distorted message in order to get people to listen to him and hear his message. Woe to the preacher who gives in to the temptation to do this!!! People have rejected true preaching throughout history, particularly in the days of Israel and the Old Testament prophets. However, the rejection did not justify a prophet to change God’s message.

Very, very few people liked Jeremiah’s message. Most people who heard him rejected his words outright. However, God was among the few that were pleased with his words. In matters of public opinion, Jeremiah was one of the least respected of the prophets in his day. The false prophets were the ones loved. In God’s opinion, he was the greatest prophet in Israel in his time. In fact one of the single longest books in the Bible is *Jeremiah*, which was written by him and describes his ministry. To a true child of God, pleasing God should be all that truly matters.

In summary we should never forget Jeremiah 17:9-10, which reads

<sup>9</sup> "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"

<sup>10</sup> I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.

Verse 9 warns us about how wicked our heart is by nature. It is deceitful. It will convince us that we are doing right when we are merely doing what we want. The only way we can know the truth is to spend time going through all of Scripture on a regular, systematic basis and comparing what it teaches with what we believe and are doing. Verse 10 tells us how God actively tests our hearts and minds. This includes but is not limited to our response to Scripture and what He is trying to teach us through it. He then works in our lives according to what He observes. The important thing is that God is actively working in our lives. He leads (Psalm 25:5), He expects us to follow, He evaluates how well we follow, and then He acts within our lives accordingly (Jeremiah 17:10, Hebrews 12:5-14). He is Lord, He is God.

#### **4. God wants those in a church to love Him first of all.**

We are commanded to love Him first of all. In Matthew 22:36-40 we read,

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.’”

There are two ramifications to loving God.

First, we will obey Him. We read in John 14:23, “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word.’” In John 10:3-4, Jesus mentioned that His sheep hear and know His voice. This implies that the person in the congregation who has itching ears and cannot endure sound doctrine, as described in 2 Timothy 4:1-5, does not love the Lord. It also says that the pastor who changes his message to please the one with itching ears does not love the Lord—from the Lord’s perspective.

The second ramification is that if we truly love God, then we will not love the world and the things of the world. We read in 1 John 2:15-16,

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.”

Jesus was hated by many people, being condemned in part because of His godly living. This pattern actually started when Cain killed Abel, because Abel’s works were righteous and Cain’s were not. Jesus said that those people who hated Him will also hate us. We read in John 15:18-20,

"If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also."

Many people in a community will take offense to a church that takes a proper Biblical stand on various issues, such as Biblical morality or true Gospel preaching—particularly preaching that has a Scriptural emphasis on eternal judgment as well as a passionate call for repentance from sin as part of its salvation message. People who merely want their ears tickled will not endure proper preaching. Jesus Christ wants us to remember this. A church should be more afraid of displeasing the Lord of Lords and King of Kings than those in its community. A church should be training its people that opposition to their message can be expected, even as Christ told us, and should be preparing its people not to be intimidated when and if this happens, but to trust God through the opposition.

God plays for high stakes, ones of eternal value, and goes by absolute truth. I would like to reiterate that He is not interested in our excuses for error. He expects us to be diligent to understand properly what He has revealed to us and then to submit to it. If a person gets the Gospel wrong, he goes to hell for eternity. His reasons for not believing properly are irrelevant. They do not keep him out of hell. Likewise, the believer who gets doctrine wrong has no excuse in God’s eyes. God’s says in 2 Peter 3:16 that there are things that are hard to understand in Scripture. Ignorant and unstable people twist these things to their destruction. God is not interested in our excuse if we get a doctrine wrong. He is not interested in how many people get it wrong. He expects us to “get it right.” If we get a doctrine wrong, we need to expect some kind



of penalty associated with the error. The penalty that will be extracted according to the above verse can even amount to our destruction (obviously, temporal destruction and not eternal destruction if we are saved). Too many people have become flippant about God's holiness and standards. They seem to believe that since God loved us enough to send Christ to die for our sins, then surely He loves us enough that as long as we are "sincere" by current worldly standards, that is adequate. This is not what the Bible teaches.

This is important: If we twist God's grace into a license to disregard what God has specifically revealed He wants, we are fools. If a person thinks that now that he has been saved, that he has the freedom to think lightly of God's standards, then he better be careful. He may have made only a false profession. He may be using the false profession as the vehicle to allow him to continue following Eve's pattern of deciding for oneself what is right and wrong. The false profession merely gets God off his back so that it becomes easier to sear his conscience while continuing to place personal understanding and preference above God's revealed will. This situation can apply both to those in congregations and to pastors.

There is a lot of talk about love in the church today. However, most of it is about "how real God's love is for us" and "how we need to have real love for other people." Both of these topics have Biblical roots and need to be properly taught and practiced. However, this is not the entire story. There is something essential which is frequently ignored. Our primary responsibility is to love God first of all, particularly at the expense of not loving the world and the things of the world. There is extremely little emphasis in the church today on the level of obedience that Scripture reveals God expects from us as a measure of true love for Him.

Most people today pick a church based on which one will meet their humanly-perceived needs most effectively. Most churches try to attract a congregation on the same basis. Both sides are man-centered in their emphasis. The people have very little interest in hearing about what God expects from them, particularly if this might interfere with their lifestyle. In effect, their attitude is that they want God to offer them blessings for now and eternity in exchange for whatever crumbs they can give Him without too much inconvenience. They take offense to doctrine, reproof, and correction—they do not want to submit to it. If such a person claims to love God, he is deceives himself—but not God.

True love for God longs to know what God wants from us and then longs for the grace to be faithful in giving this to Him. If this is foreign to a person, there is a very definite possibility that he is still unsaved. A pastor has the responsibility to sound this warning loudly and clearly—Scripture does (2 Corinthians 13:5, 1 John 3:4-10).

It is true that we love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:18). One may very appropriately start a Gospel message with an emphasis on God's great love for us. However, if the message does not lead from here into our fundamental responsibility to love God above everything else and to demonstrate that love by submitting our life to His Lordship and obeying Him, then it is a false, incomplete message.

The title "Christ" means "the anointed one"—i.e. "the King." He is "the King of Kings and Lord of Lords." All authority has been given to Him in heaven and on earth. No one can "come" to Him as Savior who does not implicitly respect His Lordship. Coming to "the King" as

Savior implies an implicit recognition of His authority over us and our responsibility to submit to it. A faith in the good things the Christ (the "King) offers us, but without Scriptural repentance as an essential part of the message, is never presented in Scripture. However, it is the norm in many pulpits today. John very clearly states that if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in Him. How foreign that message is to so many churches today!

Perhaps the above paragraph would be clearer if 1 Corinthians 15:3 were translated, "For I delivered unto you first of all that which also I received, "that the King died for our sins according to the scriptures...." Notice, the passage does not say, "Jesus" died for our sins, which would emphasize His humanity. It is "the Anointed One" or "the King" who died for them.

The One who died for our sins is the One who has been given all authority in Heaven and on earth and expects obedience: "If you love Me, you will obey Me." This needs to be made clear in our preaching of the Gospel. Yet, it is not what professing Christians with itching ears want to hear preached. By contrast it is what the King wants preached.

## **5. God wants those in a church to witness despite adversaries.**

An overview of the history of Ephesus can be extremely revealing to us spiritually. Paul spent more time at Ephesus than any other place—three years. He described his ministry there in 1 Corinthians 16:8-9,

But I will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost. For a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

The "open door" is typically associated with witnessing. Paul was given a unique life's work—he was the apostle to the Gentiles. He went about starting many, many churches in many, many places. Yet, he never made it to Egypt, to France, or to Britain, all of which were parts of the Roman Empire. He never made it outside of the Roman Empire. Paul's active ministry was only about 15 years from the beginning of his first missionary journey in 48 A.D. until he was martyred in about 68 A.D, if the five years he spent in prison are excluded. Three of the active years—20 percent of his time of free service—were spent in a single church, Ephesus. Why did he "tarry" so long in Ephesus? Because of the great open door that had been given to him. God was blessing him so much that he could not bear to break away and pursue his apostolic ministry in other places.

Paul stated that he faced many adversaries in the midst of his witnessing in Ephesus. We can be certain that he was not preaching the "happy church", compromised message of today. If people accepted Christ, it could cost them their jobs and possibly prison time if not their lives. Coming to Christ could cost them family relationships. Paul preached openly and honestly about what Christ offered and what it could cost them in this lifetime if they believed. They came to God because they recognized Him as the sovereign Lord and that they were guilty before Him; Christ was their only hope of eternal life. God wants a church and its members to proclaim the Gospel aggressively to those in its community and, as the Lord enables, beyond it. A true Gospel message will give the same reaction today that it did in Paul's day.

## 6. God wants those leading a church to declare the whole counsel of God.

When Paul was at Miletus speaking to the Elders of the Ephesian church, he made the following comments:

"...How I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house (Acts 20:20).

and

Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears (Acts 20:26-31).

Using Paul as an example for one preaching or teaching God's word, the standard God expects is simple. If God has revealed something in Scripture that would be helpful to a person in his audience, then the one delivering the message is not to hold back from declaring it accurately and in its entirety. Love may require us to be patient with a young believer. We must never forget the admonitions and guidelines of Romans 14. However, the weaker brother was received for fellowship, but was not allowed to teach his ideas or to create controversy (Romans 14:1). If the message presented by a church twists Scripture or leaves important elements of it out, God holds the preacher/teacher accountable for the person's incurred judgment for not responding to the message he didn't hear. This should terrify anyone representing God before others. God is not interested in our fear of a person's response. He is interested in whether or not we fear His response to us if we make an unfaithful or incomplete declaration of His message. The Bible warns us in James 3:1, "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment." How sadly so few in the pulpit today take this warning seriously. How much stricter is the judgment? The passage doesn't say. However, in the light of the earlier discussion on God's holiness, it seems to be reasonable that it is far stricter than anyone of us comprehends or anticipates or, more importantly wants for ourselves.

I have heard many, many pastors who seem to be sincere and appear to have a heavy burden for those in their congregation. But, they do not conduct their ministry in a manner consistent with Paul's teaching in this passage. Their message is lopsided. They declare only things that will tickle their congregations' ears. Warnings, doctrines, and instructions that might offend those in the congregation are avoided. So, despite their appearance of sincerity and zeal, they misrepresent what God reveals He wants preached and taught.

Remember Paul's words, "I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God." It becomes scary, literally, to think of the ultimate consequences of the current, compromised approach to ministry so characteristic of many churches today.

## **7. God wants those in a church to count as anathema (accursed) those who twist the Gospel.**

In Galatians 1:6-9 we read,

<sup>6</sup> I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel,

<sup>7</sup> which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

<sup>8</sup> But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.

<sup>9</sup> As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

<sup>10</sup> For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.

Paul warns that there will be people that will pervert the Gospel—that is, they will twist it or distort it. We are to count them as “accursed” or, as some versions translate it, “anathema.” He then goes on to say in verse 10 that he does this to please God—not men.

Why is such extreme response required? A perverted gospel is a counterfeit Gospel. It does not have the power to save, but is so close to the truth that it appears legitimate. It can easily delude an unsaved person into thinking he has done what God requires of him when he hasn't. God's wrath is aroused against a person who preaches a false, counterfeit, twisted Gospel. Unfortunately, many contemporary presentations of the Gospel do not measure up to Biblical standards. An error can only be detected by critical examination in the light of Scripture.

Exposing a false Gospel and the one preaching it is not typically appreciated. Paul had the authority of an apostle. This authority was obvious to anyone willing to evaluate it honestly. He had more visible results than any other person in church history. Yet, apparently people took offense to his own efforts to practice this verse. If it was difficult for Paul to do this, how much more difficult will it be for us! Yet, not only is the verse stated here, but God states it twice in a row for emphasis. God truly expects us to take this command seriously.

What makes a gospel twisted to the point it is no longer adequate to save those who rely on it? Satan is creative and can invent all kinds of subtle errors to destroy the effectiveness of the message preached to save. In truth, we simply need to study 1) what the Bible presents and 2) the tone in which it is delivered. Next, we need to be extremely wary of anything that deviates from this. In some cases, the deviation can be obvious. For instance, obvious errors would be rejecting the deity of Christ or a literal physical resurrection. Mixing works and grace for salvation is also an obvious error. In other cases, the twist may be subtle and its significance not obvious.

I have heard that when a bank trains its tellers how to recognize counterfeit money, they are not exposed to counterfeit money. Instead, they go through an intensive study of real money. They then have a standard for recognizing when a counterfeit shows up. I believe that many if

not most evangelical churches today preach a counterfeit gospel. But, before explaining what is wrong, we first will look at some basic Scriptures concerning relevant issues. The message we will arrive at has been the historical position of protestant churches until a new approach was deliberately started in 1948, which was called the “neo-evangelical movement.” Since then, the new approach has pretty much taken over protestant theology with very few remnants left of the historical position. By first establishing the nature of the true Gospel, the false, twisted, counterfeit gospel of the neo-evangelical movement should be easier to recognize.

This is extremely important, because if this is indeed the case, there will be many churchgoers today who have been led to believe that they are saved, when in truth they haven't. They need to be made aware of the true issues in the hopes that they will face the errors standing between them and salvation and resolve them.

Romans 1:16-23 sets the tone for a Gospel presentation. It reads as follows:

<sup>16</sup> For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

<sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."

<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

<sup>19</sup> because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.

<sup>20</sup> For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse,

<sup>21</sup> because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

<sup>22</sup> professing to be wise, they became fools,

<sup>23</sup> and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man-- and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

(Romans 1:18-23)

In verse 16 we are taught that there is a message which has the power to bring to salvation everyone who believes. Obviously, not all messages have this power. The message with this power is called the Gospel. Paul is bold about preaching this message, because of his deep felt desire to see people saved.

Then, in verse 18 there is a shift. We find out that the need for salvation is universal. Man is universally under God's wrath unless and until he gets saved. However, the unsaved man does not want to know about this or change his life because of this, so he suppresses the truth in his unrighteousness. He is a slave to sin (John 8:34), likes his master, and does not want to change.

Verse 19 is interesting. It tells us that there are basic truths about God that every person already knows. He knows them because God personally reveals them to everyone. An atheist is merely someone who is attempting to suppress this knowledge. Deep down he knows better. He just doesn't want to know it. He doesn't want the message of the Creator God to be true. This is why so many atheists are so belligerent. One frequently wonders why they can have so much hatred focused on something they claim doesn't exist. Actually, they know He does.

Verse 20 explains how God reveals Himself. It is not a verbal revelation, such as we have in the Bible. Instead, it is through the creation. God uses the creation to reveal that a living God created it, One who is eternal in nature, who has the power to work miracles at will, and who is holy and is Lord over His creation. These last two items are implied in the word "Godhead." If God created man, it is evident that He then has the right to set standards for man and to rule over him. God also imparts to him knowledge of His holiness—man already knows that his sins separate him from God. God's lordship and holiness are the reasons he suppresses the truth about a living Creator. His conscience is stirred up when he thinks about the Creator. He suppresses this knowledge. God observes his suppression.

The last part of verse 20 is particularly important. God considers the evidence of these things—His eternal power, His holiness, and His authority to rule—to be so clearly revealed to each person that the person has no excuse for his suppression. When God judges a person in the Day of Judgment, this will be the starting point—the person has no excuse for his rejection of God.

The remaining verses in the passage talk about how man tries to cover his conscience with false religion. He invents his own religion, one which gives him the appearance of worshipping God without needing to submit to the true God's authority or holiness. In truth, he wants to live his own life without God interfering with it. Or, what he would really like is some form of wisdom that would allow him to control God. This is the promise of occult religion. However, such power does not truly exist. He is stuck with a conscience condemning him for his sin and his rebellion and he has no way out.

So, when we witness to a person who has never heard the Gospel, this is how God views him. He is not in a neutral state; he is already hostile to the Creator, is already a slave to sin that he likes, and does not want his little world destroyed. This is the situation we need to address in a Gospel presentation.

Furthermore, we in ourselves do not have the power to break through the wall a person puts up to avoid being confronted with the truth. Here is where John 16:8-11 becomes important. As we speak on sin, righteousness, and judgment in our Gospel presentation, the Holy Spirit comes along side us and convicts the listener of the truth of our message. We do the easy part—we deliver the message. The Holy Spirit does the hard part—He makes it true to the person hearing it. This is God's pattern for true conversion. However, and this is extremely important to the discussion, for the Holy Spirit to convict of sin, righteousness, and judgment, we need to focus our Gospel presentation on these issues. In general this is not being done today.

A true Gospel has the objective of reconciling a rebellious sinner to a just and holy God, a God who wants to be Lord in the sinner's life. Any other gospel is twisted and its messenger is to be counted anathema.

There is not the time or the space here to examine the salvation messages of John the Baptist, of the Lord Jesus Christ, of Peter, or of Paul, many of which are presented in Scripture. However, there are common themes through them. A person needs to repent. That is, he needs to turn from his current course of running from a holy, authoritative God into a life of submitting to Him and desiring His holiness for himself. He needs to be confronted with the prospect of eternity in the Lake of Fire if he does not repent. The purpose of coming to God is reconciliation with the Holy God, cleansing from sin, and receiving eternal life. These are the things God wants emphasized in a Gospel presentation. These are the things the Holy Spirit uses to bring true conviction. God has many other benefits associated with salvation. However, these are not the primary ones and do not provide a legitimate basis in their own right for coming to God for salvation. A message which emphasizes peripheral issues while deliberately avoiding the major ones is a twisted message.

An accurately presented Gospel is an offense to every person who is unsaved. To him it has the smell of death, of eternal damnation (2 Corinthians 2:14-17). By contrast, to us who are saved it is the fragrance of life, of eternal life. We need to recognize that we will need to deal with this natural offense and work through it if a person is to be truly saved.

Man is in a desperate situation. From Romans 1 he is already a rebel in God's eyes before he hears the Gospel. He is already unqualified to face a Holy God. He has no power in himself to save himself. If he is to have any hope, he needs a solution to come from God. Praise God! God did provide a solution. However, it was extreme in its cost. It required that His Son empty Himself of the outward expression of His deity, take on human flesh, bear the stigma of being made sin as a substitute for our sins as He died a horrible death on the cross. We should be in awe of the love, grace, and mercy of a God who would do this for us. Woe to that Gospel messenger who cheapens the seriousness of sin and what it cost God to provide for it!

Unfortunately, the modern gospel has changed its emphasis. Its goal seems to be to bring a person into the kingdom without offending him, without confronting him with the problems already condemning him. However, in the light of what we just studied, this is impossible. A person already has a debt of sin he needs to deal with, which he is already suppressing, and which he does not want to face. God intends the Gospel to be the means for him to deal with it.

In order to avoid offense, many preachers today change the Gospel message so that eternal issues are avoided. They will still teach that Christ died for our sins, but now the penalty for sin is limited to the problems of this life. He will be frustrated, unfulfilled, unhappy, without purpose, etc. To a person rebelling against serving a holy God who wants to be his Lord and Master, a watered-down gospel which allows him to continue in his rebellion without truly dealing with his rebellion is a good deal. He is open to a gospel which does not require repentance, has no eternal consequences if rejected, and does not make more than token demands on his morality. This can take the place of his false idols to divert his conscience. He can accomplish the same thing with an inoffensive message, reputedly representing God's message.

But, this is better—it supposedly lets him continue as he wants to without dealing with the issues he is running from, but now having Scripture to convince himself that he is okay. It is no wonder that this message can fill up the pews. However, this is not the message preached by John the Baptist, by Jesus, by Peter, by Paul, or by Jude. Unfortunately, it does not have the power to save.

So, the false message preached so commonly today deliberately avoids the offensive aspects of the Gospel. In a true presentation of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit is required to convict of sin, righteousness, and judgment for conversion to take place. The contemporary counterfeit has removed the offensive parts so that a person can respond to the message in his flesh. The problem is that he is now pronounced saved, but has not dealt with the issues causing his damnation.

Thus, we see why God wants a church to take the command of Galatians 1 seriously. This means the teachers in a church need to warn those in the congregation about those preaching false messages. Sometimes, this may mean declaring the false teachers by name, even as Peter did in Acts 8:18-23, as Paul did in Acts 13:8, 1 Timothy 1:20, 2 Timothy 2:17, and 4:14, and as John did in 3 John 1:9-10. When the Apostle Peter drifted into heretical behavior, even he was not exempt from Paul's public name calling, as recounted in Galatians 2:11, although Peter repented. Taking Galatians 1 8-9 seriously means protecting the pulpit from Gospel twisters. Most significantly, it also includes training those in the church sufficiently well that they can generally discern for themselves when a false teacher appears.

## **8. God wants a church to emphasize doctrine.**

Many churches today claim that doctrine is divisive and should be avoided as much as possible. By contrast, 2 Timothy 3:16 – 4:5 presents the proper, foundational attitude God wants a church to have about doctrine:

<sup>3:16</sup> All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,

<sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

<sup>4:1</sup> I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom:

<sup>2</sup> Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.

<sup>3</sup> For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers;

<sup>4</sup> and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

<sup>5</sup> But you be watchful in all things, end

ure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

Notice a few key points from this passage: First of all, all of Scripture is God-breathed. If God said it, it has value. It is my personal understanding that there is not a doctrine of Scripture that God considers to be unimportant, although some are obviously more important than others.



However, whenever a doctrine is misunderstood, it will inadvertently result in some kind of problem. I recognize that there are some things that God keeps secret (Deuteronomy 29:29) and some which are so ambiguous that a certain allowance can be made for those having different opinions. Also, sometimes dispensational distinctions can result in certain teachings not applying to us in our time. However, in general, differences of opinion are not an excuse for getting a passage wrong—particularly for those in the ministry. God expects us to get doctrine right, even if it is hard to understand. This is clearly presented in 2 Peter 3: 16-17,

“... in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked;”

Notice, there are various passages of Scripture that God acknowledges are hard to understand. Yet, He still holds a person responsible to understand them properly and do what they say. Notice the results of getting them wrong: *Twisting them* will lead to a person's destruction.

God is holy. He rejects all that is foreign to His character. The consequences of misunderstanding something God expects us to understand should drive us to study carefully. Yet, many pastors and churches today seem to have no fear of falling short of what God wants. There is no fear of the stricter judgment a pastor will have when a person is led to his destruction by the pastor's twisted understanding of various passages of Scripture.

Scripture is to be used for the following purposes:

- 1) Doctrine
- 2) Reproof
- 3) Correction
- 4) Training in righteousness.

It seems that many if not most churches do not preach in a manner to fulfill these purposes, except perhaps occasionally in a superficial manner.

With the strongest possible charge, Paul then tells Timothy to “Preach the Word.” Timothy is commanded to preach so as to convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. He is to do this in season and out of season—in other words, it is his responsibility to do this whether or not the audience is receptive to it.

Paul goes on to tell Timothy, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.”

What more can I say? Congregations will want cotton candy and not meat. They will not endure sound doctrine. They will have itching ears and turn away from the truth.

How should a preacher respond to this? He is to preach the Word! He is to preach doctrine, he is to rebuke, he is to convince, he is to teach patiently. What if the audience will not listen to him? In such a case, if he has done everything in his power to warn them, there is

nothing more that he can do. But, he will have honored God and God will be pleased with him. Jeremiah 23 reveals God's anger with those who preach twisted messages to please the people. Oh, that the preachers in today's churches would read, understand, believe, and apply these words to their own messages they deliver in the name of the Lord.

## **9. God wants a church to give eschatology the same importance that He does.**

Eschatology is the study of "the last things." It includes a number of topics, including the rapture, the tribulation period, the Millennial Kingdom, the Great White Throne Judgment, the New Heavens and the New Earth, as well as many others.

If doctrine in general is unpopular today, appearing to be too divisive, then eschatology is even more so. Many, many people like to declare it an unessential, divisive subject and therefore one to be avoided. Yet, from God's perspective, eschatology is extremely important. For instance, in the Gospel of Matthew, the Olivet Discourse, which is devoted exclusively to teaching on the last things, takes up two full chapters. 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5 contain an extended passage on the rapture and its timing. Most of 2 Thessalonians 1 and 2 are about the tribulation period as well as God's promise to keep us out of it. The book of Revelation is one of the longer books in the New Testament—and the entire book is devoted to the last things.

Together, these represent a large number of extended passages on a subject that God **wants** us to understand. He did not devote this much Scripture to something just so we can ignore what He said in order to promote artificial unity and peace with those who reject His teaching about it. It is disobedience to the Lord for a pastor not to train properly those under his care concerning what these passages mean.

It is also extremely important that a Christian understand dispensations in order to understand what God expects of him at this time. Dispensations provide the key for the proper interpretation of Scripture. It is obvious that God occasionally changes the rules in how He deals with men. This is something He has a sovereign right to do and the Bible shows that on occasion He has done it. For instance, dietary rules changed a number of times. Rules were different before the Law of Moses was given than afterwards. Rules are different for a Christian, who possesses the indwelling Holy Spirit, than they were for Israel, which was under the Law. They were different for Adam and Eve before the Fall and after the Fall. They were different before the flood and after the flood (capital punishment was instituted after the flood). Dispensationalism is simply the study of these changes. Many apparent Biblical contradictions disappear when interpreted dispensationally.

From a practical standpoint, dispensational distinctive today affect us in two main areas.

The first concerns Biblical prophecy. There is not space to go into these issues here with any depth. However, from a dispensational perspective God is primarily using the church to call out a people for His name. Evangelism and discipleship are its two main functions to accomplish this. Christ could come back at any time and the church's role on earth in the current dispensation is then finished. The church is not to be involved in government. Its role is not to set up a Kingdom on earth. It is not to reform society, except as an incidental impact through the preaching of the Gospel. A dispensationalist believes in a rapture which can take place at any time.

Dispensations also have a primary impact on the rules for the Christian life. The period of time we are living in now is unique in man's history in a particularly significant way. Believers possess the indwelling Holy Spirit. A believer's entire relationship with God focuses on this unique distinction. The rule of life for the Jew in the Old Testament was the law of Moses. However, that was nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14) and the Christian is no longer under it (Galatians 3:25).

Instead, the rule of life for the believer is to walk in the Spirit, exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit. At the judgment seat of Christ, God will evaluate our service to Him on the basis of how effectively we have walked in the Spirit. People that do not understand dispensations typically tend to revert back to the Ten Commandments as God's standard. This is totally different than walking by the Spirit. If a church does not take a stand and teach these things, how can its people even know properly what God expects of them?

When my children were very young, most of them played youth soccer. At the youngest age group, they really had no comprehension of the rules. It was hard for them to understand that if they kicked the ball into the other team's goal area, it counted against them, not for them. Furthermore, they found studying rules boring. They only wanted to play ball. I fear that too many Christians, both those in the pulpits and those in the congregations, want to live their Christian lives the way a young child plays soccer. They don't know the rules and they are not actually interested in the rules. They just want to do what makes sense to them and expect God to accept it. But, we serve a Holy God who has told us that this is not how He scores our effort.

## **10. God wants those in the church to exhibit Christian character towards each other as well as those outside the church.**

The entirety of Colossians chapter 3 provides principles of Christian character and living which God wants a Christian to practice. A church should teach these things. Proper teaching starts with the example set by those in church leadership and continues with the proper exposition of Scripture.

Christian character begins with love, but actually goes beyond it. Love is the unifying bond of many qualities. The Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated love in action as he lived among men in the world. He was focused on meeting the needs of others. He did not use His authority for personal advantage. He emphasized forbearance and forgiveness. In all of this He was not weak and did not compromise truth. He was willing to expose the sin of hypocrites publically and forcefully. Notice, Jesus never compromised His messages by treating sin lightly. He made clear the tortures of Hell for those who did not repent. (Those who claim they "want to be like Jesus" but refuse to preach on Hell and judgment might do well to keep this in mind). He repeatedly preached on the necessity of repentance. Yet, He was full of compassion for those to whom He ministered.

The Bible gives many principles of how a Christian is to practice love for those around him. 1 Corinthians 13:1-8 and most of the book of 1 John add to Colossians chapter 3 in presenting standards God wants His child to live by. Of course, there are more guidelines

throughout Scripture than this, but these are extended passages dealing with major principles which need to be emphasized in a church's message and demonstrated in a believer's life.

## **11. God does not want those in the church to be unequally yoked**

The Bible speaks of a coming one-world religion as part of its teachings on “the last things.” This will apparently be based on the mysteries of ancient Babylon, which began in the days of Nimrod. The modern-day ecumenical movement appears to be working to bring all religions together to this end. The one-world religion will be under Satan's control and opposed to true worship of the living God.

Because of these teachings, it seems relevant that in January of 2016 Pope Francis, the current Roman Catholic Pope, spoke to a certain crowd of people representing a number of different religions, including Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The speech was recorded and is posted in a video on the internet at an **official** Roman Catholic Church website at <http://thepopevideo.org/en/video/interreligious-dialogue.html> . The speech is short and does not take long to listen to. In his speech the Pope made the following statement, transcribed from the video,

“Most of the planet's inhabitants declare themselves believers. This should lead to dialogue among religions. We should not stop praying for it and collaborating with those who think differently... Many think differently, feel differently, seeking God or meeting God in different ways. In this crowd, in this range of religions, there is only one certain we have for all: We are all children of God...I hope you will spread my prayer request this month: that sincere dialogue between men and women of different faiths may produce the fruits of peace and justice. I have confidence in your prayers.”

Pope Francis, January 2016

So, in summary he stated that we are all children of God, regardless of which religion we are participating in. He thus validated the other religions—according to this statement they can all legitimately claim God as their Father. Furthermore, he promotes a prayer for dialogue between men and women of different faith with the goal that this dialogue will ultimately produce peace and justice. This will be the public agenda of the coming one-world church.

It appears that we are watching before our eyes steps that could well be leading to the coming one-world religion. If the Pope gets his wish, it appears to be only a matter of time until all religions set aside their doctrinal differences and work together (under his leadership, of course) for the peace and justice of the whole world. It is interesting that Revelation 17:9 in the Bible prophesies that the headquarters of Babylon the Great, which will head the one-world religion, will be in Rome, the city of seven hills. This is also the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church today and it is the Roman Church which is spearheading the current unification of the world's religions into worship of a common god and into pursuing common goals of “justice and peace,” Doctrinal issues are to be subordinate in the process. Current news articles document Pope Francis's further efforts to bring about the unification of the world's religions. Eventually, at the end of the tribulation period, God will once and for all destroy this religion.

There will be rejoicing in heaven when He does this, as declared in Revelation 19:1-5. In Revelation 18:4, God's people are told to come out of her lest they share in her sins.

God wants His church to avoid entanglements with the ecumenical movement, which is doing its part to help bring in the coming one-world religion. Satan is orchestrating the ecumenical agenda. God's desire for us to stay separate from this movement is an outflow of His holiness, which prevents Him from enduring the presence of anyone or anything foreign to His character. As the Sovereign God, Ruler of the Universe, He is fully capable of working out His purposes for the church without the church entangling itself in relationships with the enemy.

Churches today involved in the ecumenical movement try to justify their emphasis on interdenominational unity by the passage in John 17:20-23. They claim that this passage quotes Jesus praying that all of those in His church may be "one." What they don't talk about, of course, that most of the churches in the ecumenical movement are led by unbelievers, theological liberals who preach a false Gospel. According to Galatians 1:8-9 we are to count them accursed, not join together with them for the sake of an artificial organizational unity.

If one looks carefully at John 17:20-23, he will see that a better interpretation of the prayer Jesus made in the passage was the then future time when all true believers would be baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. The answer or fulfillment of the request is the event discussed in 1 Corinthians 12:13. So, before He died, He prayed specifically that the Father would accomplish what we read in 1 Corinthians.

The ecumenical movement's interpretation of John 17:20-23 is complete nonsense. They claim that in the passage, Jesus was pleading with the Father to grant unity to the church. Therefore, when we have organizational distinctions such as we see in Christendom today, we thwart the Father's answer to this prayer and make Jesus unhappy. What those claiming this do not understand is that absolutely nothing can thwart a direct prayer between the Son and the Father. For instance, Jesus said in the Garden of Gethsemane that if He were to ask the Father, He would immediately receive 12 legions of angels at His disposal to prevent His arrest (Matthew 26:53-54). Of course, this would have meant He would not go through with the crucifixion and there would be no possibility of any of us being saved. But, this episode shows the absolute willingness of the Father to give the Son whatever He asks for in prayer. Nothing can thwart the answer to the Son's direct request to the Father, even if it would result in the plan of salvation being scrapped. So, there is absolutely no way any of us has the power to step in and thwart or interfere with the request Jesus made in John 17. It is heresy bordering on blasphemy to claim we can. The ecumenical movement is based on a heretical interpretation of this passage.

Actually, God does not want the church yoking together with unbelievers in general, regardless of how noble the cause may seem. The church marches to the beat of a different drummer. God's primary mission for the church is for the Gospel to be preached to those in the world so that He can "take out of them a people for His name" (Acts 15:14). A Gospel message can preach against the sins of the LGBT movement, against the sins of the abortion movement, against the sins of Common Core, as well as a long list of other sins, from lying to adultery to drunkenness, etc. However, it is not the responsibility of the church to fight political battles or to

get entangled in these affairs. The church is not to join up with those who are unbelievers, no matter how noble the cause might seem. The primary teaching of this is in 2 Corinthians 6:14-18:

<sup>14</sup> Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?

<sup>15</sup> And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?

<sup>16</sup> And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people."

<sup>17</sup> Therefore "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you."

<sup>18</sup> "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

The church is to remain focused on its primary mission, preaching the Gospel and bringing believers to maturity in Christ. Our citizenship is in heaven, not here. We are merely aliens on a mission.

## **12. God wants those in a church to stand against occult, pagan practices instead of promoting them.**

It seems strange to need to mention this, but in this day of Laodicean compromise, nothing should surprise us. Occult, pagan practices are being promoted by many churches today. God wants us to have nothing to do with them.

Some of the buzz words for pagan practices contrary to the teachings of Scripture are spiritual exercises or disciplines, silence, contemplative prayer, and spiritual formation. These have no place in the life of a Christian who is led by the indwelling Holy Spirit. These are counterfeit methods Satan uses in pagan religions to deceive his subjects, ones who do not have the Holy Spirit. If a person claims to be a Christian and yet becomes enamored with these, he should seriously question his salvation. Why is a lie of Satan more attractive to him than what God offers him through His Word and the Holy Spirit? Is it because he does not have the Holy Spirit and has only deceived himself about being saved? Is it because he does not have the indwelling Holy Spirit and therefore cannot experience the Holy Spirit's direct personal interaction with him? Is he looking for a substitute to fill in for the missing Holy Spirit? If so, Satan has a substitute ready to offer.

Satan is the father of lies and he is a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). Hence, what he offers are only counterfeit practices, ones which might appear to promote spirituality while ultimately destroying those who become entangled in them. By contrast, the true God has breathed out His Word, the Bible, and declares that His Word is sufficient to make the man of God "complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:17). The believer does not need more than what God provides in the Bible.

A good counterfeit can look very much like an authentic original. However, it is actually worthless. There are many people who have striven to make the above pagan practices appear to be Biblical. Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Eugene Peterson, and Henri Nouwen are among the leaders of this. You need to flee the works of these authors. You also need to flee from any preacher or teacher who promotes them. If you are a child of the King, why do you reject the spiritual banquet He has prepared for you and go out and beg moldy crumbs from the King's enemy?

Sadly, many churches now promote the above-named practices as a way to achieve a higher level of spirituality. By contrast, a pastor has the responsibility to protect those under his charge from the ungodly men and practices named in the above lists by warning people about them, even as the Apostle Paul warned the churches by name about those who were potential threats.

Remember the Spanish Inquisition! Ignatius Loyola founded the Jesuits for the specific purpose of stopping the damage that the Reformation was doing to the Roman Catholic Church. He instituted a reign of terror in his country, Spain. The inhumanity and injustice of the Spanish Inquisition still overwhelms our sensibilities when we read about them. Some of the cruelest instruments of torture in human history were invented by the Jesuits in order to torture not only true believers in Christ, but also anyone who was merely charged with being a believer.

Yet, Loyola practiced spiritual disciplines (or exercises as he called them) which were supposedly designed specifically to make him more Christ-like. He practiced spiritual exercises, contemplative prayer and silence. None of these made him spiritual. None of them were effective in bringing about his salvation or giving him a spiritual walk with God. They only numbed his conscience until it was no longer sensitive to truth. They only opened the door of his heart and mind to what was actually demonic influence, but what he thought was from God. Before a Christian becomes too enthusiastic about spiritual disciplines, silence, contemplative prayer, visualization, etc. he should ask himself if Ignatius Loyola represents the kind of person he wants to use as his spiritual model!

A believer might get caught up in these practices in ignorance. However, if his heart is right before God, he should be willing to repent of any involvement with them once he has been exposed to the truth.

It is tempting to discuss the above counterfeit practices and show how they deviate from God's word. However, since there is actually a lot of material about this available on the internet and because this analysis is already quite long, we will hold off. Instead, we will next present what God offers as the true means of spirituality.

### **The Spiritual Walk for a Believer**

The spiritual growth of a child of God is the result of a personal interaction with the Holy Spirit. God is the Lord. God speaks to us through His Word. We read His Word and the Holy Spirit uses it to teach us what it means and how it applies to our lives. His desire is that as He deals with us, we yield to what He is attempting to teach us. In our unsaved state we are like a wild stallion. As a believer, we need to be broken, to be tamed, to respond gently to His slightest

leading. The “rule of life” for a believer is to “walk in the Holy Spirit.” “Rule of life” means our primary responsibility, the primary basis on which our service will be evaluated at the judgment seat of Christ. The Christian’s possession of the indwelling Holy Spirit is unique to this dispensation. It is the basis for our relationship to God in this dispensation.

“Walk in the Spirit” means to go through life step-by-step in submission to the leading of the Spirit, to be in fellowship with Him as He personally interacts with us, and to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit of Galatians 5 as He produces it in us. There are a lot teachings in the Bible related to this which cannot be elaborated on in this analysis, such as Christian fellowship, prayer, praise, singing Spiritual songs, witnessing, giving, etc. Ideally, a believer throughout His life will be repeatedly exposed to God’s Word. This will normally result in growth in His walk with Christ and produce a more intimate relationship with Him through the Holy Spirit. The important thing to remember is that spirituality is a relationship with God the Father, with Christ, and with the Holy Spirit as a response to His Word working in our hearts. As God takes us through various blessings, trials, and opportunities for service in this life and as we learn to rely on Him through all of this, we grow spiritually. We experience the love, joy, peace, patience, etc. of the Lord because He produces it in us, not because we in the flesh go through some counterfeit method to manufacture it.

A blind person could never paint a true work of art; he simply does not have the capacity to see what he is doing. This is similar to an unsaved person trying to live a spiritual life. An unsaved person has nothing to teach a child of God about walking in the Spirit.

### **13. God wants a church’s music program to honor Him.**

God made man with the capacity to appreciate music. Moreover, both the Old Testament and the New Testament record many songs sung to God as an act of worship. An analysis of these songs shows that their primary emphasis in praise of His works and His character. Congregational singing in praise to God characterizes the church of the New Testament. The Christian sings “a new song,” making melody in his heart to God . The Bible presents true worship in song (as well as in prayer) as the expression of clear, organized thinking under the control of the Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately, much contemporary “Christian” music does not reflect Biblical principles. The modern approach to many churches is to have music which will reputedly attract unbelievers. Unbelievers do not have the Holy Spirit dwelling with them and do not relate to the new song God places in a believer’s heart. The only way to appeal to an unbeliever is to entertain his flesh. Yet, according to Galatians 5:17, “The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.”

Music which appeals to the unsaved person will have its attention focused on the feelings of man, not the clear recognition of the attributes of God and the works He has done. Loud, hypnotic, repetitious drum beats will dominate over melody and harmony. One verse with vague phrases sung five times in a row is preferred over five verses sung in order with each having a clear, distinct message. Singing led by a “praise group” with hardly anyone from the



congregation participating is preferred over a song director leading a congregation in robust, heartfelt singing. Hymn books offend and are no longer used.

Traditional, protestant church music is thus preferred over modern contemporary “Christian” music.

A pastor may wish to preach a thorough, spiritual exposition of Scripture in his sermon, complete with teaching, rebuke, correction, and training in righteousness as commanded by the Lord in 2 Timothy 3:16-4:5. The music should be focused on preparing their hearts for this kind of message. By contrast, when the service leading up to the message has been focused on gratifying the flesh, it will be very difficult to get people to endure sound preaching, even as we should expect from Galatians 5:17. This verse teaches that the flesh and the spirit war against each other and are opposed to each other, preventing a person from being able to do what he wants. So, inappropriate music feeds the situation as described in 2 Timothy 4:3-4, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.” It is to be expected that as the music in a worship service strays further and further away from Biblical principles and makes more and more appeal to the congregation’s flesh, that those in the congregation will have a harder and harder time submitting to sound teaching in the sermon. This is not good for the spiritual welfare of a church. Current experience confirms this.

## **Conclusion.**

God is good. He is worthy of our worship. He is worthy of our service. There truly is great contentment in walking in His Spirit, looking to Him to lead us and give us what we need, and use us for His purposes. May our eyes be opened to understand from His Word what He wants from us, and may He give us the grace to respond properly to what He reveals to us in it.

May Christ come soon!