

# **That They May Be One**

Studies in the Catholicity of the Church

by  
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## Preface

In the Nicene Creed there appears the affirmation, “We believe in one Holy Catholic and Apostolic church.” The word Catholic, of course, means universal, and it cannot be taken to be the franchise of any single branch of the Christian faith. The word itself was first used by Ignatius in his letter to the Smyrnaean Christians about a decade or so after the death of the Apostle John. In his letter, Ignatius said, “Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church.”

Unfortunately, the ideal of unity in the church has been almost abandoned by evangelicals. Due to the extensive fragmentation within the conservative sector of Christendom, which is called evangelicalism, not to mention the fragmentation within Christendom as a whole, the definition of unity has eroded so that it merely means homogeneity, sameness, common interest and lack of difference. For evangelicals, grave suspicions about ecumenicalism’s involvement in the social and political arena has weakened if not cancelled any real hopes of Christian unity along denominational lines. In not a few cases, the call for unity has been more of a weapon of war than a kiss of peace. It has been an excuse for a purge against those who would question, doubt or differ with a given perspective. Christians, ironically enough, declare that a person is free in Christ, and then they immediately proceed to build as many walls as possible around him or her to protect that freedom. Peer pressure is enormous, and often, the call for unity merely means that there should be no minority opinion. As one person said it, “When everyone thinks alike, no one thinks much!”

This study is an attempt to address this question of unity in the context of biblical theology. If the church is to be one, as Christ prayed, then Christians must not simply resign themselves to fragmentation. Granted, they must not lapse into latitudinarianism either, but Christian unity in the midst of Christian diversity is a goal toward which the theology and experience of the first Christians point us. It is hoped that this study will aid in that effort.

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## Where Do I Draw the Line?

“A man of catholic spirit is one who gives his hand to all whose hearts are right with his heart. . . (who) loves as friends, as brethren in the Lord, as members of Christ and children of God, and fellow heirs of his eternal kingdom, all of whatever opinion, or worship, or congregation, who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ; who love God and man; who rejoicing to please, and fearing to offend God, are careful to abstain from evil, and zealous of good works.”<sup>1</sup>

*John Wesley*

One of the most debated questions in the history of Christendom is the question of fellowship and brotherhood among those who claim the name Christian. Should we draw lines, and if so, where? What constitutes the center of the Christian faith? Which doctrines are negotiable and which are not? What sort of Christian efforts are to be supported, and where must one decline support? Upon what basis do we extend fellowship to other Christians? Whom do we consider to be brothers and sisters in Christ? These are the questions to be explored in the following study.

## The Case for Unity

### Christ’s Great Plea (Jn. 17:9-11, 20-23)

Jesus’ prayer in John 17 is often called his “high priestly prayer.” In it he interceded for himself, his apostles and the community of believers who would be formed through their preaching. It is this latter portion of his prayer with which we are concerned.

#### “That All of Them May Be One”

Four times in this prayer, Christ prayed that believers might be one (vs. 11, 21, 22, 23). It is important that this be understood as a plea for their continued unity. Unity was already an established reality since they were in the Father and in the Son by believing the gospel message. Christ did not pray that they would “become one”, but that they would “continually be one” (durative present subjunctive)<sup>2</sup>

This oneness should be understood in the sense of unity--a unity of will and

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<sup>1</sup> J. Wesley, “The Catholic Spirit,” Verdict 5 (2, 1982) 19.

<sup>2</sup> L. Morris, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) , 727; W. Hendriksen, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 357.

purpose.<sup>3</sup> It is in express harmony with Christ's new commandment of love (Jn. 13:34-35). The quarreling of Christians cannot be God's will, and it is a perpetual stumbling-block to unbelievers.

### **“Even As the Father and the Son Are One”**

The unity of the Father and of the Son in the godhead must be reflected in the church. This unity between the Father and the Son is described in John's gospel as a unity in:

- ♦ a mutual love (10:17; 14:31; 15:9; 17:24)
- ♦ a cooperative work (5:19-21; 10:25, 37-38)
- ♦ an undivided honor (5:23; 7:18; 8:49-50, 54; 13:31-32; 14:12-13; 17:1,5)
- ♦ a desire to please (5:30; 8:29)
- ♦ a singularity of purpose (6:38, 39; 10:29-30)
- ♦ an intimate fellowship (6:46; 8:38, 55; 10:15; 17:24)
- ♦ a common teaching (7:16-17; 8:25-28; 12:49-50; 14: 24b)
- ♦ a solidarity in decisions (8:16-18)
- ♦ a unity of essence (12:44-45; 14:7-11, 20)
- ♦ a joint ownership of spiritual realities and values (17:10)

### **The Purpose of Oneness**

Jesus described the primary purpose of this plea for unity: it is essential to the task of the church “. . .so that the world may believe.” Possibly the biggest hindrance to the spread of the gospel is the suspicion and rivalry that some Christians have for other Christians.

Implicit within the message of the church is the good news that the Father sent the Son for the salvation of sinners, and He loved the community of humans to the same measure that he loved the Son (vs. 21b, 23). It has been truly said, “A disunited Christian community denies by its behavior the message it proclaims”.<sup>4</sup>

### **Paul's Great Plea (Ep. 4:3-6)**

Paul enjoins Christians to give their maximum effort to maintain the unity which is derived from the Holy Spirit. The basis for this unity which Paul describes is to be found in seven unique categories, three of which depict the unity in the godhead between the Holy Spirit (vs. 4) , the Lord Jesus Christ (vs. 5) and God the Father (vs. 6)

<sup>3</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, The Gospel According to St. John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 136, 192.

<sup>4</sup> B.Lindars, The Gospel of John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) , 530.

One Body (There is only one church, the church universal. It is neither sectarian, sexist, racially prejudiced or socially divided, Ga. 3:26-28)

One Spirit (Every believer is marked by the same Holy Spirit as a member of the one body, I Co. 12:12-13; Ep. 1:13-14)

One Hope (The single hope of every believer is the return of Jesus Christ, Tit. 2:13)

One Lord (The single Master of every believer is Jesus Christ, I Co. 8:5-6)

One Faith (The universal faith of every believer is his or her commitment to the atoning, saving accomplishments of Jesus' death and resurrection, I Co. 15:1-4)

One Baptism (The one baptism of every believer is his or her baptismal expression of faith toward the person and saving work of Jesus Christ. Every person who is baptized with a view toward his or her faith in Jesus Christ has received the one baptism of which Paul speaks, Ga. 3:26, 27)

One God, the Father (The one Father of all believers is sovereign over all, he is actively working throughout all and he is present within all)

When Paul uses the above terms of unity, he is not giving an excuse for every different Christian group to claim exclusiveness as though they alone knew the one Lord, they alone practiced the true baptism, they alone preserved the true faith or they alone possessed the Spirit. Rather he is giving a bold call toward unity - a call to recognize the elements of commonality which all believers share in our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **John's Plea for Love (I Jn. 2:9-11; 3:11-18; 4:7-12,16-21; 5:1)**

John's great plea for mutual love within the body of believers is a recurrent theme in his first epistle. He bases his comments on his knowledge of what Jesus called the "new commandment" (Jn. 13:34, 35; I Jn. 3:11; 4:21). For John, mutual love among the believers is an unmistakable evidence of new birth and new life (I Jn. 5:1; 3:14a; 4:7, 12, 16-17). If a person refuses to love other believers, it is questionable whether he or she is truly a believer in the first place. Refusal to love other believers is a sign of alienation from God (I Jn. 3:14b; 4:8, 20). It is tantamount to murder (I Jn. 3:12, 15). It indicates that one's claim to Christianity is false, and that he or she still lives in the realm of spiritual darkness (I Jn. 2:9-11) Furthermore, love must involve more than lip service; it must issue forth in supportive action (I Jn. 3:16-18).

More could be said to further strengthen the case for unity, but the above selections are sufficient to show that before anyone may begin drawing lines of separation, he or she must first have a perspective on the unity of the universal

church. No one is qualified to draw lines who has not first taken deeply to heart God's prerequisite of love and unity. It is too often true what Swift said, "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another."<sup>5</sup>

## Where the Early Church Drew Lines

In spite of the unity with which the early church began, as the first century progressed the church was faced with several crises which necessitated drawing certain kinds of lines to avoid distorting the essential nature of the gospel. From the New Testament record of these crises, we can gain not only a sound conception of what the apostles considered sacrosanct, but also those areas that they deemed negotiable.

### The Crisis of Segregation

The events of the life of Jesus occurred within a Roman world that was severely divided along racial, national and cultural lines. Granted, Rome maintained the *pax Romana* (Roman peace) under the power of its armies. However, the outward stability was more of a forced veneer than any real unity. Underneath this veneer still seethed the tensions between Jew and Gentile in general, between the Hebrew Jew, the Hellenistic Jew and other nationalities, and between slaves and free persons. The early Christians were forced to address the problem of segregation.

### The Great Commission (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:15; Lk.24:47; Ac. 1:8)

The final words of Jesus to the disciples were that the gospel which began at Jerusalem must be propagated universally. The great commission cut directly across the massive barriers of segregation within the Roman world.

### The Hebrew/Hellenistic Crisis (Ac. 6:1-7)

Luke introduces us to two Jewish factions in the early church whom he describes simply as *Hellenistai* (Hellenists) and *Hebraioi* (Hebrews). Though both were Jewish, the differences between these groups may be summarized as follows:<sup>6</sup>

Language (Hellenists spoke Greek; Hebrews spoke Aramaic or Hebrew)

Synagogue Worship (Hellenists attended synagogues apart from Hebrews due to linguistic and cultural differences)

Culture (Hellenists, with long-standing roots in the Greco-Roman world, had

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<sup>5</sup> W. Barclay, The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 90.

<sup>6</sup> F.F. Bruce, Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 42.

absorbed much of Greek culture; Hebrews made a special point to preserve Palestinian ways)

As converts were won to Christ, some of the new disciples were apparently not self-supporting, and inasmuch as the early church took seriously their obligation to the poor, a regular distribution of food was made. However, the Hellenistic widows were being passed over. To meet this crisis, the apostles arranged a more efficient system and selected men to oversee a fair distribution. It is not without significance that of the seven men chosen, all have Greek names.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Samaritan Outreach (Ac. 8:4-17, 25)**

The tension between Palestinian Jews and the half-blood Samaritans is well attested in the NT (Lu. 9:52-56; Jn. 4:9; 8:48). Up to the time of Stephen's martyrdom, the Jerusalem church had apparently failed to follow through on Jesus' missionary commission. Now, persecution forced them out of their cocoon.

Philip began evangelizing in Samaria, and a number of native Samaritans accepted the gospel. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard of this response, they sent Peter and John to investigate. The fact that the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit during this visit by two of the most important apostles insured that the newly begun Samaritan church would be one with the established Jerusalem church.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in the first evangelistic effort beyond strictly Jewish boundaries, the unity of the church was maintained.

### **The Gentile Outreach**

The spread of the gospel to the Gentile communities was spearheaded in two separate but parallel thrusts, one by Peter and the other by believers scattered due to persecution. It is not uncommon for readers of Acts to assume that these are to be ordered chronologically, but this is not necessarily the case. It is probably better to see these two activities as roughly contemporaneous and as being the opening of the Gentile mission together.

#### *Peter at Caesarea (Ac. 10:1-11:18)*

So far, the Christian church had been wholly a Jewish or quasi-Jewish affair. However, when God sent Peter to Caesarea to proclaim the gospel to a Roman military officer, a threshold of immense significance was crossed. Peter, of course, had not yet perceived the implications of the great commission. Only after God had

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<sup>7</sup> This may very well imply that the chosen administrators were largely from the minority faction which was being neglected, cf. E. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), 106.

<sup>8</sup> F. P. Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 173-181.

jarred him out of his Jewish prejudices with a strange vision did Peter obey.

Cornelius, for his part, was ripe for the gospel. He was a gentile “God-fearer” (10:2,22), that is, one who although not circumcized as a proselyte was nevertheless predisposed to worship Yahweh and attend the synagogue services.<sup>9</sup>

After the conversion of Cornelius, his relatives and his close friends (10:24, 44, 47-48) .Peter returned to Jerusalem to discover that his fraternizing with Gentiles had aroused the prejudice of the Jewish church (11:1-3)

Only after explaining his vision and the miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit attested by supernatural signs as on the Day of Pentecost were the Jewish Christians convinced that Gentiles could indeed belong to the church (11:12-18)

### *The Multi-National/Multi-Racial Congregation at Antioch (Ac. 11:19-26)*

Roughly contemporary with Peter’s excursion to Caesarea was the establishment of a church in Antioch among the Greeks. As in the case of the Samaritans, the Jerusalem church sent a delegation, which included Barnabas, to investigate this novel situation. With the help of Saul, Barnabas forged a mixed congregation of Jews and Gentiles.

It is instructive to note that the continuing leadership in this church was quite a mixed bag (Ac. 13:1).<sup>10</sup>

Barnabas, a Jewish Cypriot landowner and Levite

Saul, a converted Pharisee

Simeon, nicknamed Niger (a Latin name meaning “dark-skinned” and probably suggesting that he was an African)<sup>11</sup>

Lucius, from Cyrene in North Africa (also possibly black)

Manaen, who had been reared in the royal court with Herod Antipas

### **The Crisis at Antioch (Ga. 2:11-16)**

So far, the early church seemed to be adjusting to the international dimensions of the gospel. However, a major confrontation finally occurred in Antioch that severely threatened the unity of the church, and it was Paul who arose to defend the implications of a universal gospel.

#### *Peter’s Visit*

When Peter came to Antioch, presumably sometime after his meeting with

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<sup>9</sup> I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) , 183-184.

<sup>10</sup> M. Green, *Evangelism Now & Then* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979) , 39.

<sup>11</sup> D. Guthrie, *The Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 95.

Cornelius, he quite openly associated with the Gentile believers, just as he had earlier (Ac.11:2)

### *Peter's Hypocrisy*

However, a delegation from the Jerusalem church arrived and pressured Peter to segregate himself. Peter succumbed. He suddenly refused table-fellowship with Gentile Christians. What measures were used to persuade Peter, we do not know. Perhaps he was warned by the Jerusalem delegation that his free and easy relations with Gentiles would bring evil repercussions upon the Jerusalem church which was itself struggling in the midst of a Jewish-Roman tension.<sup>12</sup> Whatever the reason, Peter became a segregationist and caused Barnabas to be swayed as well.

### *Paul's Reaction*

Paul's response was quick, strong and public! Here was an erosion of frightening proportions, for what was at stake was not just a matter of eating, but the essential nature of the gospel and the universal church. Martin Luther said, "Here he hath no trifling matter in hand, but the chiefest article of all Christian doctrine," and later, "There is none but Paul that hath his eyes open."<sup>13</sup> To segregate on the basis of circumcision those whom God had already accepted as true believers was to deny justification by faith and the universal character of the church! Any system of segregation which separated Christians from each other on the grounds of legalistic points was a denial of the gospel. The line was drawn! The message of the church was and is justification by faith for everyone who will believe (Ro. 1:16, 17). There is only one way! Any other way is no gospel at all (Ga. 1:6-7).

## **The Crisis of Salvation by Grace through Faith vs. Works - Righteousness**

In some ways related to the segregation crisis, there arose another issue of tremendous import. This crisis revolved around the nature of the gospel and the necessary response to it if one was to be saved. In broad terms, it was an issue of salvation by grace through faith over against salvation by religious works.

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<sup>12</sup> F. F. Bruce, Peter, Stephen, James, and John (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1979) , 34-37.

<sup>13</sup> M. Luther, Commentary on Galatians, trans. E. Middleton (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1979), 55, 61.

## A Heresy Comes to Galatia<sup>14</sup>

The conflict between traditional Jewish beliefs and the influx of Gentiles into the church came to a head in Galatia. This time it was at a deeper level than just segregation. What was implicit in the segregation crisis now became explicit in the teaching of some Jews who visited Galatia.

### *Nature of the Galatian Heresy*

The position of these teachers can be gleaned from the way in which Paul argues against them. They contended for the viewpoint that justification was based upon one's religious works (3:1-5). In other words, for them salvation was a matter of doing rather than a matter of believing. The religious works that they viewed as mandatory were circumcision (5:2-3; 6:12-13), the observation of Jewish feast days and sabbaths (4:10), and in short, a full return to Mosaic legalism (4:21; 5:4).

### *Paul's Agitation*

The seriousness of this heresy becomes apparent if one observes the agitation, intensity and sharpness with which Paul treated it (1:6-10; 3:1-5; 4:9-12; 5:2, 7, 12).

### *Paul's Defense of the Gospel*

The entire Galatian letter is Paul's defense of the gospel of grace against salvation by religious works. The following points are highlights in his defense:

- ♦ Justification is by believing, not by doing (2:15-16; 3:26).
- ♦ The attempt to be justified by doing sets aside the grace of God (2:21).
- ♦ The law was only a temporary institution until the gospel was revealed (3:23-25)
- ♦ The gospel has set us free from attempting to be saved by religious rituals and technicalities (5:1, 6; 6:15)

### *The Line is Drawn!*

Obviously, Paul had no hesitation in drawing a sharp line where the gospel was at stake. His description of the heretics leaves no room for doubt. He labels them perverters of the gospel (1:7) , men-pleasers (1:10; 6:12), false brothers and spies (2:4), zealots for alienation (4:17; 5:4), race spoilers (5:7) , agitators (5:12) , cowards (6:12) and boasters (6:13). He pronounces upon them an apostolic curse (1:8, 9).

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<sup>14</sup> The chronology of events is debatable, but I am in agreement with those scholars who see the Galatian letter as being written shortly before the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, cf. W. Ramsey, The Teaching of St. Paul in Terms of the Present Day (1913 rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 383ff.; R.Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles", The Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. F. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) , 440-442.

## **The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)**

When Paul and Barnabas had returned to Antioch from their first missionary tour (Ac. 14:26-28), they found to their dismay that the heresy they had combated in Galatia was by no means dead. Now it had come to Antioch via some Judean Jews who were also teaching salvation by works (Ac. 15:1-2a). It was time to settle this issue once and for all, and a delegation was selected to go to the apostles in Jerusalem (15:2-4).

### **The Opposition Party (15:5)**

The Judaizers made their case plain. One could not be saved by faith alone; rather, he must also perform certain religious requirements.

#### *The Council (15:6)*

Church councils have often received bad press in the history of Christianity, but it must be remembered that the precedent for church councils was set here by the first century church, and the importance of their contribution cannot be denied. The final conclusion of this first church council was based on the cumulative impact of three presentations:

Peter's Contribution (15:7-11) How many speakers were heard, Luke does not tell us, but he does describe the clinching arguments. Peter once more recounted his experience at the house of Cornelius. His teaching was succinct and decisive:

- ♦ The Gentiles heard the gospel and believed
- ♦ God showed that he accepted their faith as sufficient for salvation by giving a supernatural sign, just as on the Day of Pentecost
- ♦ Purification was by faith
- ♦ Salvation is through God's grace

Barnabas' and Paul's Contribution (15:12) From Antioch to Cyprus to Pisidia to Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, Barnabas and Paul described their Gentile mission. The message they had preached was salvation by grace alone and faith alone (13:12, 32, 38-39, 43, 48-49; 14:1, 21-23, 27). God attested his acceptance of this message by divine signs (14:3). No doubt Barnabas and Paul recounted the blinding of Elymas (13:9-11) and the healing of the cripple (14:8-10).

James' Prophetic Exegesis (15:13-21) James, the half-brother of Christ, provided the Scriptural clincher from the OT. Recalling the prophecy of Amos 9:11-12, he reminded the brothers that it was God's intention all along to revive

the Davidic family in Jesus Christ so that the Gentiles could be saved.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, instead of making salvation that much more difficult by demanding of the Gentiles that they conform to Jewish legalism, the church ought rather to encourage them for love's sake to be considerate of the scruples of their weaker Jewish brothers.

The Encyclical (15:22-31) A letter was composed by the Council to be sent back to Antioch. The notion of salvation by works was flatly rejected. The teachers who propagated it were disclaimed. It was only requested that the Gentile believers show respect for the convictions of their Jewish brothers. It would be well for them to avoid certain things that were particularly offensive to the Jewish conscience (food sacrificed to idols, blood, meat from strangled animals) and also to abstain from sexual immorality.

The letter was forwarded from Antioch to the other Gentile churches, and out of courtesy for the Jewish believers, Paul circumcised Timothy who was himself half-Jewish (16:1-4). It may seem surprising that after all this conflict Paul should circumcise Timothy. However, here a different issue was involved. Timothy's circumcision had nothing to do with his salvation but was due to his Jewish ancestry.<sup>16</sup> (Notice, Paul was not willing to make the same concession for Titus, who was a full-blooded Greek, cf. Ga. 2:1-3). In the drawing of lines, Paul was willing to bend where the gospel itself was not at stake.

## **The Crisis of Christology**

It is unlikely that the first century church engaged in abstract speculation about the relation of Christ to God.<sup>17</sup> Rather, they confessed simply that God was the Father of Jesus Christ (cf. Ro. 15:6; II Co. 1:3; 11:31; Ep. 1:3; Col. 1:3; I Pe. 1:3; I Jn. 1:3; etc.) and that Jesus Christ was Lord (Ac. 2:36; Ro. 1:4; 10:9; I Co. 12:3; Phil. 2:11; etc.).<sup>18</sup> One of the earliest Christological statements which many scholars feel was Paul's quotation of a common early Christian confession is found in I Co. 8:6.<sup>19</sup>

*“Yet to us there is but one God who is the Father, from whom are all things, and we in Him, and one Lord who is Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and we through him.”*  
*(my translation)*

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<sup>15</sup> F. F. Bruce, The Book of Acts (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 310-311.

<sup>16</sup> Marshall, 259-260

<sup>17</sup> O. Cullmann, The Christology of the New Testament, rev. ed., trans. S. Guthrie & C. A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 1-6.

<sup>18</sup> R. Martin, Worship in the Early Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 53-65.

<sup>19</sup> V. H. Neufeld, The Earliest Christian Confessions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 42-68.

However, even though there were no discussions on the question of natures, such as arose in the succeeding centuries of the church, there did appear some Christological issues that the apostolic church felt compelled to address.

### **The Colossian Heresy**

The Colossian letter was Paul's vigorous answer to the news of a strange teaching which was being expounded at Colossae (1:7-8). Nowhere does Paul give a formal definition of the heresy, but that there was a serious problem is evident not only from Paul's anxiety but also from the anxiety of Epaphras (2:1-4, 8; 4:12).

#### *The Nature of the False Teaching*

The fundamental character of the Colossian heresy can be sketched in by piecing together the hints of it in Paul's refutation.

Devaluation of Christ: It is clear that in some way the false teaching detracted from the preeminence of Christ (1:15-19; 2:9). Associated with this loss of Christ-centeredness was the veneration of angels, which seemed to set spirit-beings on a level with Christ as worthy of worship and even seemed to suppose that a believer might depend upon visions for his faith (2:18). Twice Paul uses the phrase "elements of the world" (*stoicheia tou kosmou*; 2:8,<sup>20</sup>), and many scholars believe that this phrase embraces personified spiritual forces, such as, angels, demons and pagan gods as they were studied in connection with astrology. Finally, Paul charges the heretics with "self-made religion" (*ethelothreskia*; 2:23).<sup>21</sup> He sternly warns the Colossians against such theosophy (2:8).

Fullness Beyond Christ: As a natural parallel to this devaluation of Christ came a devaluation of his accomplishments. The new teachers placed a great deal of emphasis on the ideas of fullness and knowledge. It is the consensus of scholars that Paul is mirroring the vocabulary of the false teachers in his emphasis of these subjects. Notice how the first two chapters abound with references to the ideas of fullness and knowledge:

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<sup>20</sup> H. H. Esser, "Stoicheia," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. C. Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), II, 451-453; J. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 591; R. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 10-14.

<sup>21</sup> H. Dermot McDonald, *Commentary on Colossians & Philemon* (Waco, TX: Word, 1980), 96-97.

FULLNESS*pleroo* (verb = to be filled)

1:9 , 2:10

*pleroma* (noun – fullness)

1:19, 2:9

*plerophorias* (noun = full assurance)

2:2

*teleios* (modifier = completion or maturity)

1:28

*pas* (modifier = all or every)

1:9, 1:10 (twice), 1:11, 1:15, 1:16 (twice), 1:17, 1:18, 1:19, 1:20, 1:23, 1:28 (twice), 2:2, 2:3, 2:9, 2:10

Apparently, what the new teachers were inculcating was the notion that Christ and his accomplishments were all right so far as they went. However, if the believers really wanted to have fullness of life--if they really wanted a full spiritual experience-- they needed to move beyond Christ into some other areas.<sup>22</sup> These areas would not only have included the mysticism of angel-worship, mentioned earlier, but also asceticism (2:16, 21-23), circumcision (2:11;3:11) and Jewish legalism (2:16).

Exclusivism: The teaching that the person and work of Christ was not sufficient led directly toward division. Paul was concerned that the church not be split up into factions due to the elitism of those who claimed superior knowledge and spiritual experience (1:20, 28; 2:1-5, 18b-19; 3:11-17).

*Paul's Refutation*

The focal point of Paul's refutation of the Colossian heresy was his description of Christ as preeminent. Against those who would say that Christ was not enough or that Christ was only one among several objects of worship, Paul declared that Christ is fully God. He is preexistent before all things, he is the agent through whom God created all things (including angels), he is the power which sustains the universe, he is the authority over the church universal, he is supreme in all things and he is the sole means of human access to God (1:17-20). Christ is not just a heavenly being; he is the full expression of Deity (2:9). He exercised his authority

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<sup>22</sup> R. C. Lucas, Fullness & Freedom (Downers Grove, IL:IVP, 1980) , 21-24.

KNOWLEDGE*epignosis* (noun = full knowledge)

1:9, 1:10, 2:2

*sophia* (noun = wisdom)

1:9, 2:3

*gnoseos* = (noun = knowledge)

2:3

*sunesis* (noun = understanding)

1:9, 2:2

over all the spirit-beings in the triumph of the cross (2:15). Furthermore, Jewish legalities were only anticipations of the reality which is in Christ (2:17). In challenging the Colossians to uphold the supremacy of Christ, Paul reminds them of their original faith in the gospel which was complete, sufficient and universal (1:6, 22-23; 2:6-7). There is complete fullness in Christ (1:28; 2:2-4, 10).

### *The Line is Drawn!*

Here again, Paul draws a line of demarcation! Those who teach that Christ is not enough--that fullness can only be achieved by something beyond faith in Christ--are in serious error. Paul says that they:

- ♦ are deceivers (2:4)
- ♦ promote hollow and deceptive philosophy based on human tradition (2:8)
- ♦ become accusers of the brothers (2:16)
- ♦ display a hypocritical humility (2:18, 23)
- ♦ disqualify true believers from their proper goal (2:18)
- ♦ are carried away with mystical experiences (2:18)
- ♦ are filled with unspiritual pride and wrong ideas (2:18)
- ♦ have been severed from Christ (2:19)
- ♦ show a pseudo-wisdom which is worthless (2:23)

Paul did not hesitate to reject a system which made mystical experience rather than Christ the center of the Christian faith. The fullness of the deity of Jesus Christ is essential to the faith of the church!

### **The Asian Heresy**

The closing literature of the NT traditionally associated with the name "John" (I, II, III John, Revelation) is almost universally believed to have originated in Asia Minor.<sup>23</sup> In the present study, we are primarily interested in the heresy addressed in I and II John. Unfortunately, we cannot cross-reference the readers of these letters with the same ease as the readers of Paul's letters. If the author was indeed the Apostle John, as traditionally assumed, then the Ephesian church is a good possibility for the origin of the letters since John apparently spent his last years there. However, since such a conclusion is widely debated, we would do well not to place undue stress on it.

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<sup>23</sup> R. Martin, New Testament Foundations (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1978), II, 366f. The epistles are formally anonymous, and their authorship is keenly debated. See the scholarly commentaries or works on NT introduction.

### *The Character of the False Teaching*

In spite of the fact that our knowledge of the geographical and biographical background of I and II John is limited, we can gain an adequate picture of the heresy which confronted the Asian believers:

Schism in the Church: It seems clear that a serious rupture had occurred in the church. The heretical opposition had either been forced out or had withdrawn (I Jn. 2:19; 4:4). However, the influence of their heretical teaching was still a real danger (I Jn. 2:26; 3:7; II Jn. 7-8). It may well be that the dissidents were setting up a counter-community of their own.<sup>24</sup> It was necessary that believers be able to clearly distinguish between truth and error (I Jn.4:6). Only by correctly understanding certain vital Christological truths could there be a firm basis for fellowship (I Jn. 1:3).

The Boasts of the Heretics: The specific nature of the heretics' claims may be seen in the several uses of phrases such as "...if we say..." or "...if a man claims..." and so forth. The heretics boasted that they:

- ♦ Knew God (I Jn. 2:4; cf. 4:8)
- ♦ Loved God (I Jn. 4:20)
- ♦ Had fellowship with God (I Jn. 1:6)
- ♦ Lived in God and walked in the light (I Jn. 2:6, 9)
- ♦ Had reached moral perfection (I Jn. 1:8, 10)
- ♦ Were progressive thinkers (II Jn. 9)
- ♦ Were legitimate prophets (I Jn. 4:1)

The Theological Error of the Heretics: Despite their lofty claims, the dissenters denied some of the most fundamental truths about Jesus. They denied his:

- ♦ Messiahship (I Jn. 2:22; cf. 5:1)
- ♦ Sonship (I Jn. 2:23; 4:15; 5:1, 5, 9, 10, 13; II Jn. 9)
- ♦ Incarnation (I Jn. 4:2-3; II Jn. 7)
- ♦ Very possibly his atoning work (I Jn. 1:7; 2:2; 3:16; 4:10; 5:6)

The Ethical Error of the Heretics: Coupled with their deficient conception of Jesus, the dissenters also deviated from Christian behavior. They apparently openly

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<sup>24</sup> G.Barker, "I John," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), XII, 297.

disregarded the ethical demands of Jesus (I Jn. 1:6; 2:4, 6, 15, 29; 3:6, 7, 10; 4:5), and they refused to show Christian love to the community of believers (2:9, 11; 3:10b, 14b-17, 20).

### *Early Hellenistic Parallels to the Asian Heresy*

Scholars have long noticed striking parallels between the Asian heresy of I and II John and what is known of other early Christian heresies.

Gnosticism: A fully developed Gnosticism did not appear until the second century, but there was very possibly an incipient Gnosticism emerging toward the close of the first century.<sup>25</sup> Gnosticism was characterized by a concept that only spirit was good while matter was essentially evil. This concept, if embraced by a Christian, would drastically alter his conception of Jesus Christ for it would forbid any real incarnation.<sup>26</sup>

Docetism (from the Greek verb *dokeo* = to seem) : One Gnostic answer to the problem of the incarnation was that Christ only seemed to be a real man, that is, he appeared to have a real human body while in reality he did not.<sup>27</sup> In some apocryphal literature it was asserted that Christ felt no pain on the cross, that the divine Christ was not even in the body of Jesus while he was crucified, and that sometimes when one touched Jesus it was as though he did not have a material existence at all.<sup>28</sup>

Cerinthianism: Cerinthus, a contemporary of John the Apostle at Ephesus, taught that Jesus Christ was two separate beings. He claimed that the man Jesus was born of Joseph and Mary. The divine Christhood only came on him at his baptism and departed before the crucifixion.<sup>29</sup> A famous anecdote told by Polycarp (70-155 A.D.) and recorded by both Irenaeus (2nd. century) and Eusebius (3rd. & 4th. century) describes the Apostle John going to a bathhouse in Ephesus. When he discovered that Cerinthus was there also, he fled, exclaiming, "Let us fly, lest even the bathhouse fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of truth, is within".<sup>30</sup>

### *The Refutation*

How closely connected the above Hellenistic heresies are to the one combated in I and II John is not clear. However, most scholars feel that there is too much similarity to be merely coincidental. In any case, I and II John stringently

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<sup>25</sup> I. H. Marshall, The Epistles of John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, 15.

<sup>26</sup> W. Barclay, The Letters of John and Jude (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 5-7.

<sup>27</sup> A. Hunter, Introducing the New Testament, 3rd. rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) , 179.

<sup>28</sup> Barclay, John and Jude, 7-9.

<sup>29</sup> E. F. Harrison, Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) , 439-440.

<sup>30</sup> J. R. W. Stott, The Epistles of John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 46.

object to a deficient view of Christ Jesus. Anyone who denies Jesus' messiahship or divine Sonship is bluntly labeled a liar and an antichrist (I Jn. 2:22, 23). The Christian confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, is indispensable to the Christian faith (I Jn. 4:15; 5:1, 5, 9, 10, 13). Any notion that the Son of God was not truly incarnate is deceptive and a part of the great spirit of antichrist that will invade the world at the end (I Jn. 4:2-3; II Jn. 7).

Many interpreters see the statement in I Jn. 5:6-7 as directly addressed to Cerinthianism. Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, both at his baptism by John ("water") and at his crucifixion ("blood").<sup>31</sup> It is certain that I John stresses the atoning work of Jesus as the Son of God (1:7; 2:2; 4:10). II John even goes so far as to forbid fellowship to deviant teachers who will not acknowledge both the Father and the Son (verses 9-11)

### *The Refutation Continues in the Post-apostolic Church*

The deficient views of the nature of Jesus Christ were not easily overcome. Ignatius, the bishop of Syrian Antioch (1st. and 2nd. century) ,wrote against the same sort of ideas.<sup>32</sup> Polycarp, also, the disciple of the Apostle John, quotes I John 4:3, "For everyone who shall not confess that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is antichrist."<sup>33</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Here, again, the apostles drew a line. Any teaching that denied the humanity of Christ, the messiahship of Christ, the divine Sonship of Christ or the atonement of Christ could not claim to be truly Christian.

## **Areas of Diversity and Tolerance**

The unity of the church for which Christ prayed is obviously not a unity at any cost. There are areas where the early church felt compelled to draw lines so as to preserve the very foundation for their unity-the foundation which is Christ and the gospel. As we have seen, they refused to be segregated, they stood firm on the fact that the very nature of the gospel was grounded in grace and faith rather than in works, and they defended the full deity as well as the full humanity of Jesus Christ. Other areas that they deemed nonnegotiable were the historical resurrection of Jesus from the dead (I Co. 15:12-23) and the direct access of the believer to God through Jesus Christ without mediation (He. 4:14-16; 7:23--8:6; 9:24-28; 10-19-22; I Ti. 2:5).

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<sup>31</sup> Hunter, 179; Barclay, *John and Jude* 9; Stott, 176-180; Marshall, *I John*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Ignatius, "To the Trallians, 9-11" and "To the Smyrnaeans, 1-3" in J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956) , 74-75, 82-83.

<sup>33</sup> Polycarp, "To the Philippians," in J. B. Lightfoot, 97.

However, even though the early church stood firm on these foundational issues, they were quite flexible in other areas. There was no monolithic rigidity which forbade differences of opinion. Rather, the early assemblies and even the apostles were quite diverse in many ways. It is to some of these areas of diversity and tolerance that we now turn.

## **Diversity in Scruples**

Scruples may be defined as a reluctance on grounds of conscience. A major question of early Christians was regarding how far they should allow their consciences to be their guides, and furthermore, how far they should attempt to impose their conscientious scruples on others. Here the apostles were quite tolerant of differences. In fact, Paul was quite willing to allow temporary divergences in the confidence that God would ultimately give illumination to the sincere seeker (Phil. 3:15-16)

### **Jewish Scruples**

Christianity did not eliminate culture. The consciences of many Jews who became Christians had been so thoroughly educated that they could not easily jettison their national Scruples-nor did the apostles demand this of them. Some 25 years or so after Pentecost,<sup>34</sup> the churches in Jerusalem were still carefully following the customs handed down by Moses (Ac. 21:17-26). Paul himself had no objections to this as may be seen in his cooperation with the Jewish leaders and in his circumcision of Timothy (Ac. 16:1-3). However, as we have seen already, Paul was adamant that such practices were not essential to salvation nor could they be imposed upon Gentile believers (Gal. 5:1-6, and etc.). Furthermore, any Jewish scruples that led to segregation Paul severely denounced (Gal. 2:11-14). After the Jewish wars in 66-73 A.D., when the Jewish Christians were scattered, the practice of Jewish scruples faded away.

### **Eating, Drinking and Entertainment Scruples in a Pagan Environment**

A major issue among early Christians concerned the private and public sacrifices offered regularly to pagan gods.<sup>35</sup> In private sacrifices, the animal was divided in three ways: there was the part to be burned to the god, the part to be given to the pagan priests, and the remainder to be kept by the worshiper for his or her own consumption. Often, the worshiper gave a dinner party for his friends with his portion. In public sacrifices (ones offered by the State) the animals were similarly

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<sup>34</sup> G. Ogg, "Chronology of the New Testament," New Bible Dictionary, 2nd. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1982) 204.

<sup>35</sup> W. Barclay, The Letters to the Corinthians, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 77ff.

divided except that the remainder of the animal which was not burnt or given to the pagan priests was sold in the markets. One could not be sure whether a particular cut of meat was associated with pagan sacrifice or not. Thus, Christians faced the question of scruples: is it permissible to share a meal with non-Christian friends and take a chance that the meat may have been associated with pagan idolatry, or alternately, is it permissible to buy meat in the open market and take the same risk?

### *In Corinth*

Paul laid down several principles in response to the Corinthian's questions on this issue (I Co. 8:4-13; 10:14-33).

- ♦ Eating meat offered to a pagan idol is not wrong in and of itself as long as one does not do it in recognition of the pagan god.

At the same time, one must be respectful of the weak consciences of those who have scruples against eating such food.

- ♦ No believer should ever participate in feasts which are “explicitly under the patronage of a pagan deity.”<sup>36</sup>
- ♦ Nevertheless, believers should feel free to share meals with unbelievers without raising embarrassing questions.
- ♦ Whatever one eats or drinks must be done with the motive of glorifying God.

### *In Rome*

A variety of similar scruples were addressed in the Roman letter-scruples regarding vegetarianism, the drinking of wine, the observance of sacred days, and so forth. Again, Paul grants freedom for the believer to work out these areas between himself and God (14: 5-6, 10-12, 14, 22-23). However, a loving regard for the scruples of others is essential (14: 1, 15, 21). Any attempt to pass judgment on others who have divergent scruples is forbidden (14: 1, 3-4, 10, 13, 19).

### **Appearance**

The early church had virtually nothing to say about physical appearance. The apostles never gave value judgments on the widely different clothing styles of the Roman world which included the robes of Palestine, the togas of Italy, the kilts of the soldiers and the loincloths of slaves. Beauty for the Christian was based upon godly character rather than clothing and ornamentation (I Pe. 3:3-5; I Ti. 2:9-10). Restraint, self-control and good taste were always in order.

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<sup>36</sup> F. F. Bruce, *I & II Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 96.

## Diversity in Church Ordinances, Sacraments and Practices

Modern Christians sometimes mistake style for authenticity when it comes to the practices of the church. In the early church there was a refreshing variety of ways to do things, and the early Christians seemed generally free from narrow pedantry.

### Anointing with Oil

A practice of the early church in praying for the sick was to anoint the sick person with oil. This custom, first described in the Galilean ministry of Jesus (Mk. 6:13), was later encouraged by James (Ja. 5:14). The exact purpose of this anointing is nowhere explicitly stated. Some interpreters, on the basis of the Greek text, understand it as medicinal,<sup>37</sup> while others see it as a symbol of the power of God or the Holy Spirit.<sup>38</sup> One thing is clear. While anointing with oil was permissible and in some cases encouraged, it was certainly not indispensable. The vast majority of occasions in the NT in which prayer was offered for the sick do not mention anointing with oil. The option for such a practice was apparently left up to the one invoking Christ's name in behalf of the sick.

### Celebration of Special Meals

The early church celebrated two special meals, the *agape* or communal love meals and the Lord's Table, Communion or Eucharist (Jude 12; I Co. 14-21; 11:23-34)<sup>39</sup>. More than likely these were both held on the same occasion, the one merely being a part of the other. Eventually, they were separated, and later still, the *agape* meal gradually disappeared.<sup>40</sup>

While Paul gives some well-defined instructions regarding the Lord's table (i.e., it should be eaten by the congregation together, it should be eaten reverently, and so forth), there does not seem to be a rigidity of form in the way it could be conducted. No stipulations were given as to who could or could not lead the meal. Concerning the general ordering and observance of the meals, the NT is silent. How often they celebrated the Lord's table is unknown except that the references to "daily" (Ac. 2:42, 46) seem at least to indicate that it was conducted frequently while the reference to the "first day of the week" (Ac. 20:7) alludes to Sunday and may possibly indicate that it was weekly. In Troas, the Lord's table was celebrated as an after-midnight climax to a lengthy teaching service (Ac. 20:7, 11). There is no hint in the NT of special kinds of bread or wine or uniform liturgies to be followed. We may

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<sup>37</sup> D. Burdick, "James," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 203-204.

<sup>38</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 130-131.

<sup>39</sup> R. Martin, "How the First Christians Worshipped," *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*, ed. T. Dowley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 123-124.

<sup>40</sup> Martin, *How the First*, 126.

assume, of course, that their celebrations followed in general the pattern set by Jesus at the last supper, but there is nothing to forbid flexibility.<sup>41</sup>

## Water Baptism

There is a certain amount of flexibility to be observed in the practice of Christian baptism in water. In fact, after the transition periods from the OT to the church covering the ministry of John and the public ministry of Jesus, it would appear that the 120 disciples who had lived throughout this transition and then received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost did not receive Christian baptism (although presumably many or most of them had earlier been baptized by John)<sup>42</sup>. Water baptism is not mentioned in all the conversion accounts of Acts (it appears in 9 of them) , but we may assume that it was the common response of faith toward the gospel. Yet in spite of the universality of water baptism as the common response of faith, there was at least some flexibility in baptismal customs.

When Paul was baptized, he himself invoked the name of Christ while he was being baptized (Ac. 22:16). Other passages may indicate that the name of Christ was called out over the candidate by the baptizer.<sup>43</sup> In any case, there was no precise baptismal formula if indeed there was a formula at all .<sup>44</sup>

- ♦ “upon the name of Jesus Christ” (Ac. 2:38)
- ♦ “into the name of the Lord Jesus” (Ac. 8:16)
- ♦ “in the name of Jesus Christ” or “the Lord” or “the Lord Jesus Christ” (Ac. 10:48; the manuscripts vary at this point)
- ♦ “into the name of the Lord Jesus” (Ac. 19:5)
- ♦ “into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19)

To be baptized “into” (*eis*) or “in” (*en*) or “upon” (*epi*) the name of the Lord Jesus or “into” (*eis*) the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit simply indicates an action of transfer, that is, the act by which the candidate hands himself over to be the disciple or the property of the one named.<sup>45</sup>

The shorter phrases were especially appropriate for Jews, Samaritans, God-

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<sup>41</sup> I. H. Marshall, Last Supper and Lord’s Supper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) , 112.

<sup>42</sup> John 4:2 cannot be translated to mean that Jesus personally baptized his apostles but baptized no one else, as some have tried to take it. If such were the case, then the words *hoi mathetai* (the disciples) would have to be in the accusative rather than the nominative case.

<sup>43</sup> P. Martin, Worship, 9

<sup>44</sup> It is quite possible, of course, that the following passages were never intended to be precise formulas in the first place.

<sup>45</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, “Baptism,” New Bible Dictionary, ed. J. D. Douglas (2nd. ed. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1982), 123; G. R. Beasley-Murray, Baptism in the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) , 100f.

fearers (like Cornelius) and disciples of John who, although they already acknowledged the one true God, needed to confess Jesus as Lord. The longer phrase was especially appropriate for “disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19), that is, pagans from among the gentiles who had no previous background in the true faith.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, by the end of the first century, since the majority of converts were by then coming from the Hellenistic world, the longer formula became dominant and has remained so within the history of Christianity.<sup>47</sup>

Other areas of diversity are not so clear. Whether or not infant baptism was an option in the early church has been debated since the Reformation. Major arguments from both sides are:

*PRO*<sup>48</sup>

- ♦ The early church baptized entire households (Ac. 10:24, 48; 16:15, 33; I Co. 1:16).
- ♦ Baptism is to the new covenant what circumcision was to the old covenant. Since circumcision was for infants, baptism should follow in due course.

*CON*<sup>49</sup>

- ♦ There are no specific descriptions of infant baptism in the N.T.
- ♦ Baptism, if it is a response of faith, must be limited to believers and therefore to individuals old enough to understand its meaning.

Likewise, the mode of baptism is contested. Those who contend for immersion argue from the meaning of the Greek work *baptizein* (to immerse). Those who contend for sprinkling argue from the symbolism of the sprinkled blood of Christ (He. 12:24; I Pe. 1:2). Those who contend for pouring argue from the symbolism of the pouring out (baptism) in the Holy Spirit (Ac. 10:45-48). While we may not be able to rule out all but one of the foregoing interpretations, we can at least agree with the wise conclusion: “Surely an insistence on the precise detailed copying of the symbol lays the emphasis on the wrong place, namely on the symbol rather than the reality, on the type rather than the fulfilment, on the outward rather than the inward, and such an attitude is contrary to the whole spirit of the gospel.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> F. F. Bruce, The Book of Acts (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 181 n32.

<sup>47</sup> “The Didache,” The Apostolic Fathers, trans. J. B. Lightfoot (1891 rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956) 126 (VII:1)

<sup>48</sup> O. Cullmann, Baptism in the New Testament (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950)

<sup>49</sup> P. K. Jewett, Infant Baptism & the Covenant of Grace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

<sup>50</sup> D. Bridge & D. Phypers, The Water that Divides (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1977), 31.

## Diversity in Worship Patterns

Many Christians have attempted to recover the essence of first century Christianity in theology and worship. However, often the assumption is made that the first century congregations were all the same, like so many peas in a pod. This is highly unlikely. One cannot, for instance, use the church at Corinth, with its charismatic extremes, for some sort of norm. While there are some rather common themes to be found in NT worship patterns, nowhere does the NT give a universal formula for how a worship service ought to be conducted. There were no denominations in the first century. There were only congregations scattered throughout the cities of the Roman Empire.

## Variations in the Common Elements

Preaching and instruction, the reading of OT Scripture and apostolic communications (Ac. 15:22-29; Ep. 3:4; Col. 4:16; I Th. 5:27; I Ti. 4:13), the singing of hymns and psalms (Ep. 5:19; Col. 3:16), the celebration of the Lord's table and the offering of corporate prayers (I Ti. 2:1) all seem to be commonly attested elements in NT worship.<sup>51</sup> In some churches (Corinth at least) there were tongues of praise and accompanying interpretations (I Co. 14:13-17, 26-28).

However, even among these practices there was no rigid pattern. On one occasion Paul preached until midnight and then the Lord's table was celebrated after the conclusion of his sermon until dawn with further teaching interspersed (Ac. 20:7, 11). We should hardly think that this was the usual practice! At the very beginning there were daily services (Ac. 2:46) while in later times services were held on Sunday (Ac. 20:7; I co. 16:1-2). What type of public readings were given was determined largely by the availability of subject matter, either OT or apostolic.

## Other Diverse Elements

In the early church there were no altars, hymnbooks (other than the OT), offering plates, choir lofts, organs, baptistries or formal church buildings. Christians continued to worship in the Jewish temple until its destruction (Ac. 2:46; 3:1; 5:20-21, 42; 22:17-18) as well as in synagogues (Ac. 13:14, 42, 44; 14:1; 17:1-3; 18:4, 19, 26; 19:8; Ja. 2:2)<sup>52</sup> and in private homes (Ac. 5:42; 12:12; 18:7; Ro. 16:5; I Co. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Plm. 2). In Ephesus Paul used a lecture hall for two years (Ac. 19:9-10) , probably in the afternoon siesta hours.<sup>53</sup> The earliest known church building is a

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<sup>51</sup> H. C. Kee, F. W. Young and K. F. Froelich, Understanding the New Testament, 3rd. ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 274ff.

<sup>52</sup> The phrase "meeting" (NIV) in Ja. 2:2 is quite literally "synagogue". Though this need not be taken literally, it may very well indicate that early Christians worshipped in synagogues, see: D. Roper, The Law that Sets You Free (Waco, TX: Word, 1977), 42.

<sup>53</sup> Manuscripts in the Western text include the phrase "from the 5th hour (11:00 AM) to the 10th hour (4:00 PM)",

converted house dating from about 232 A.D. at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates River.<sup>54</sup> The first Christian symbol, appearing as early as the first century, was the cross,<sup>55</sup> but other symbols were not long in coming.

### Early Hymns and Statements of Faith

The faith of the early Christians was often expressed in simple creeds, such as:

- ♦ “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (Mt. 16:16; Ac. 8:37; I Jn. 5:5)
- ♦ “Jesus is Lord” (Ro. 10:9; I Co. 12:1; Phil. 2:11)
- ♦ “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (I Jn. 4:2; II Jn. 7)

Christian faith was also expressed in invocations, such as, *maranatha* (Ro. 16:22b; Re. 22:20) and in benedictions, such as those found in Romans 16:25-27 and II Corinthians 13:14. Most scholars understand that statements of faith were often written poetically in the style of OT poetry and very probably were sung as hymns.<sup>56</sup> Some hymns center around the birth of Christ, such as:

- ♦ The Magnificat (Lu. 1:46-55)
- ♦ The Benedictus (Lu. 1:68-79)
- ♦ The Gloria in Excelsis (Lu. 2:14)
- ♦ Nunc Dimittis (Lu. 2:29-32)

The Book of Revelation is rich in apostolic hymnody which was probably sung by early Christians in their worship services (4:8, 11; 5:9-10, 12, 13b; 7:12; 9:17-18; 15:3-4; and etc.). Other hymns may be seen in passages such as Ephesians 5:14, Philippians 2:6-11 and I Timothy 1:17 and 3:16.

In summary, all these elements combine to point out the rich diversity of worship patterns in the early church. Many of the patterns of early corporate worship were drawn from the synagogues. Yet the Christians were innovative and not merely slavish in their expressions of praise.

### An Assessment

We have now surveyed various major crises in the early church and how they were met. The early Christians felt obliged to take their stand on:

- ♦ The universal gospel (free from segregation and sectarianism)

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see: F. F. Bruce, Paul, 290-291; also the textual variations in the UBS Greek text.

<sup>54</sup> C. J. Hemer, “Archaeological Light on Earliest Christianity,” Eerdman’s Handbook, 58.

<sup>55</sup> L. Goppelt, Apostolic and Post-Apostolic Times, trans. R. Guelich (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 205; R. Gore, “The Dead Do Tell Tales at Vesuvius,” National Geographic, May 1984, 592.

<sup>56</sup> Martin, Worship, 43-52.

- ♦ Salvation by grace through faith (apart from religious works and actions of merit)
- ♦ The full deity of Jesus Christ (as the Lord, the Son of God)
- ♦ The full humanity of Jesus Christ (as incarnate in flesh)

At the same time they showed an amazing tolerance over differences in:

- ♦ Scruples
- ♦ The practice of ordinances and sacraments
- ♦ Worship patterns

This survey ought to help us to appreciate both the central areas of our faith which we share with all those who confess the lordship of Jesus Christ as well as the negotiable areas of diversity that are to be found within Christianity. It is necessary that we recover the evangelical spirit, that is, the...

...inward, passionate, and zealous personal commitment to the Christian faith which is born out of a deep conviction that faith in Jesus Christ, who died and was raised from the dead, produces life changing effects in man and his culture. Evangelicals believe that this is the central message of Christianity, that it is the good news which gives meaning to life, that it has the power to heal the broken relationship that exists between man and God, man and his neighbor, man and nature, and man's separation from himself.<sup>57</sup>

This central message has always been the cutting edge of Christianity, and it is to be seen not only in Stephen, Philip, Peter and Paul, but also in Patrick, Basil, Bernard, Wycliffe, Hus, Savonarola, Thomas à Kempis, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Menno Simons, Tyndale, Francke, Spener, Wesley, Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, William Carey, Hudson Taylor, David Livingstone and Billy Graham.

Any expression of Christianity which majors in minor things, which defines itself by debatable issues, is far removed from the new community of faith begun by Jesus Christ. It has been truly stated, "The kingpin in every cultic machine is the obscurities of the Bible."<sup>58</sup> Our allegiance must not be to sectarianism, but to the church of Jesus Christ composed of all those everywhere who call on the name of the Lord (I Co. 1:2).

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<sup>57</sup> R. Webber, Common Roots (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 17.

<sup>58</sup> A. Rendalen, "The Gospel versus ~The True Church", Verdict (March 1981), 5.

## What Is Evangelical Faith?

The name “evangelical” is especially meaningful since it is derived from the New Testament word *euangelion* (= gospel). Quite literally, it means “one who believes the gospel,” and its essence is that the gospel (the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ) is the central feature of the Christian faith. As far back as the 16th century, the word evangelical began being used to describe a Protestant who believed in the doctrine of justification by faith. The name embraces great Christian leaders since that time, such as, Luther, Calvin, Tyndale, Zwingli, Knox, the Wesleys and Jonathan Edwards, and in our own century, such figures as Billy Graham, Charles Swindoll, Charles Fuller, and so forth. The name is non-sectarian and non-denominational. Today, there are evangelicals in every major branch of Christianity, including Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and the Protestant denominations.

Theologically, evangelicals are united upon the truth of at least three major principles:

- 1) the complete reliability and final authority of Scripture in matters of faith and practice;
- 2) the necessity of a personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior from sin and consequent commitment to Him as Lord; and
- 3) the urgency of seeking actively the conversion of sinners to Christ.<sup>59</sup>

## What Do I Really Believe?

An urgent plea is sometimes voiced by searching Christians to their leaders in the following way: “Please tell me what we believe,” or “I want to know what I believe.” Such statements betray a confusion on the part of the speakers, but more often than not, the confusion lies not in central areas of faith but in peripheral ones. They mean to say that they are confused about some secondary matter of theology (i.e., the sequence of endtime events, the nature of election, etc.). It is important, therefore, to realize that the further the issue is from the center of the Christian faith, the more likely it is to be debatable, if for no other reason than for a lack of extensive biblical information. Thus, in describing what we “really believe” about things, it is often necessary to distinguish between primary and secondary areas of our faith. It is far more important that one believes in Christ’s death for his or her sins than that he or she embraces a particular theory of church government, for instance.

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<sup>59</sup> R. Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals* (New York; Harper & Row, 1974), 2-5.

### **Non-negotiable Areas of Christian Faith**

The non-negotiable areas of the Christian faith are those central features that are spelled out clearly and unmistakably in the Bible. Unless we are to accuse God of being devious, we must believe that if something is central to our faith it will be accessible to us without tortuous methods. Without attempting to produce an exhaustive list, such central areas of faith will include:

- ♦ The sovereignty of God
- ♦ The full deity and full humanity of Jesus Christ
- ♦ The death of Jesus Christ for our sins
- ♦ The historical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead
- ♦ The nature of salvation as it is appropriated by grace through faith
- ♦ The authority and reliability of the Bible as God's inspired Word
- ♦ The universality of the church as the community of faith apart from sectarianism and segregationism

### **Negotiable Areas of Christian Thought**

The negotiable areas of Christian thought are those secondary features that become debatable because of the different emphases of various biblical passages, the brevity of information about a particular subject, and/or the difficulty in harmonizing various streams of thought and statements in the Bible. A suggestive list would include:

- ♦ Scruples
- ♦ Worship forms
- ♦ Church government
- ♦ The methodology of church ordinances
- ♦ The debate over eternal security vs. falling from grace
- ♦ Diverse eschatological theories
- ♦ The precise relationships of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit within the divine nature of the one God
- ♦ The nature and use of spiritual gifts
- ♦ The relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom

To recognize that some features of our faith are negotiable is not the same thing as saying they are unimportant or that we have no opinion on them. It is only to say that we can embrace as a brother or sister in Christ someone who happens to disagree with us on one or more of these points as long as we are together on the

primary features of our faith. On the other hand, there is no shame at all in simply admitting that one does not know for certain about some issues!

## **Faith and the Practice of Christianity**

Christianity is not merely a set of intellectual propositions. It is also a way of living. Christian faith and Christian practice are vitally connected. One must not only believe as a Christian, he is called to live as one! Popular religion often depicts happiness as the goal of Christianity. Biblical faith, while it sees happiness as a by-product of Christian living, maintains that the primary goal is to glorify God and to do His will. “As Christians we are called to holiness, not happiness. At the same time, in our quest for holiness we shall find true happiness.”<sup>60</sup>

Evangelicals must keep to the fore the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Granted, he is our brother, our friend, our comforter, and our companion--but above all he is our Lord! If he is served as our Lord, we will truly give him authority in every area of life. We shall not substitute for his lordship any of the following counterfeits of faith:<sup>61</sup>

1. Legalism - depending on our own efforts to achieve righteousness rather than on the righteousness that God makes available to us in Jesus Christ
2. Formalism - depending on the outward ritual of Christianity rather than on the inward piety of a true relationship with God
3. Humanitarianism - seeing service to humanity as the greatest of all concerns rather than submission and obedience to Christ
4. Spiritualism - depending upon immediate, sensual or ecstatic experience rather than upon the historical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
5. Eclecticism - refusing to accept the gospel alone as the one way of salvation
6. Intellectualism - understanding Christianity to be primarily a set of doctrines to be accepted rather than a committed life of discipleship to be lived for Jesus Christ

## **Evangelical Faith is Living Faith**

Christian faith as it ought to be is faith set afire by the Holy Spirit. It is faith endowed with power from above (Ac. 1:4-5, 8; 2:1-4; 4:13, 23-31). It is faith that flows from a spiritual birth (Jn. 1:12-13; 3:3-8). It is faith that is alive with love, joy, peace and hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Ro. 5:5; 15:13)!

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<sup>60</sup> D. Bloesch, Faith & Its Counterfeits (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981, 19.

<sup>61</sup> Bloesch, 23ff.

## Judgment and Judgmentalism

“Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world are you not competent to judge trivial cases: Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!”

I Co. 6:2-3

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged.”

Mt. 7:1-2a

There is a tension to be observed in the NT between the church’s responsibility for discipline and her obligation to avoid judgmentalism. Why is this tension there, and has the church correctly assessed her role? These are the questions we shall explore.

### The Vocabulary of Judgment<sup>62</sup>

The NT contains several words for judgment that should be surveyed in the very beginning. The rich nuances of the Greek language surpass the available equivalents in English. We shall be primarily concerned with the verbs which are as follows.

#### Anakrino:

- ♦ to question or examine with general questions (cf. Ac. 17:11)
- ♦ to examine someone in a court of law (Cf. Lu. 23:14)
- ♦ to call someone to account (cf. Ac. 12:19a)
- ♦ to discern (cf. I Co. 2:14)

#### Diakrino:

- ♦ to differentiate or to make a distinction, often with the connotation of wavering between two options (cf. Ro. 4:20); this word often equals doubt

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<sup>62</sup> The primary definitions are taken from Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), although other linguistic sources have been consulted.

- ♦ to pass judgment (I Co. 14:29)
- ♦ to render a decision (I Co. 6:5)

### **Krino:**

This is by far the most frequently used of the three words. It means:

- ♦ to separate or to distinguish (Ro. 14:5)
- ♦ to judge, to think, to consider (I Co. 10:15)
- ♦ to reach a decision (Ac. 3:13b)
- ♦ to judge, condemn or bring to court (Mt. 5:40)

It is important to see that the issue of when to judge or when not to judge cannot be neatly divided along linguistic lines, as in for instance, saying that *anakrino* and *diakrino* are permissible for believers and *krino* is forbidden. To the contrary, *krino* is used of both forbidden acts of judgment (cf. Ro. 2:1) as well as of permissible acts of decision making (cf. I Co. 2:2). Alternately, *diakrino* is used both of forbidden sorts of distinctions, such as prejudice (Ja. 2:4), and of permissible and even advisable sorts of judgment (I Co. 11:31). The tension must be resolved by other kinds of categories which are defined by the context in which the various words are used.

## **The Sin of Prejudice**

The message of the NT clarifies several important areas where Christians are forbidden to pass judgment. Prejudice is one of them. Prejudice is a preconceived judgment or opinion without sufficient knowledge - an irrational attitude of hostility toward an individual, a group, a race or their supposed characteristics. In general, the NT addresses three acute areas of prejudice, each arising out of a dominant-submissive category in the ancient world.

### **National/Racial Prejudice**

Racial prejudice was one of the biggest obstacles of the fledgling Christian church. The whole community of Judaism at the time of Jesus was dominated by the maintenance of racial purity.<sup>63</sup> The peoples of the world were categorized by the rabbis in a descending hierarchy of personal worth:

Racially Pure: Priests, levites, full- blooded Israelites

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<sup>63</sup> J, Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) , 270ff.

Slightly Blemished: Proselytes, illegitimates, temple slaves, freedmen

Blemished: Orphans, foundlings, eunuchs, sexually deformed

Outcasts: Gentile slaves owned by Jews, Samaritans, gentile pagans (often called “Greeks” because of their Hellenistic culture)

In rabbinic tradition, Palestine was holy ground to the exclusion of the rest of the world. Even the dust of a gentile country was unclean.<sup>64</sup>

### **Jesus’ Openness to Other Races**

Jesus deliberately began to cross the racial lines of established Judaism in his public ministry. Even though he was a Jew and ministered primarily in Jewish circles, he crossed racial boundaries to minister to Samaritans (Jn. 4:4, 7; Lu. 17:11-19) and to gentiles (Mt. 8:5-12; Lu. 8:26, 38-39).<sup>65</sup> He anticipated the breaking down of racial barriers in the church (Jn. 10:14-16). Before his ascension, he commissioned his followers to a world-wide mission to the nations (Mt. 28:18-20; Lu. 24:46-47; Ac. 1:8).

### **The Struggle of the Early Church Over Racism**

Though the early church soon became multi-racial, it did not do so without a struggle. Early on, a crisis of prejudice arose between the Greek-speaking and the Aramaic-speaking Jews (Ac. 6:1). Peter’s prejudices had to be broken down before he could be used by God to preach to gentiles (Ac. 10:9-16, 25-29, 34-35) and even then, the idea was not well accepted by the other Jewish Christians (Ac. 11:1-14, 17-18). Years later, even Peter himself found it hard to shake the peer pressure of longstanding racial prejudices (Ga. 2:11-16). Meanwhile, the breaking of racial barriers was happening on another front, where the church at Antioch became multi-racial and multi-national (Ac. 11:20-21; 13:1).<sup>66</sup>

The great controversy at the first Jerusalem council was essentially an issue of whether or not a gentile had to become a Jew before he could become a Christian (Ac. 15:1, 5-9, 19). Eventually, however, the racial controversy was settled. In the cross, Paul taught, Christ had abolished racism, and all people now stand on equal ground before God (Ep. 2:11-20; Col. 3:11-15).

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<sup>64</sup> A. Edersheim, Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 14-65.

<sup>65</sup> We are not told if the demoniac was a gentile, but without question the Decapolis where he lived was predominantly gentile.

<sup>66</sup> It would seem that the leadership at Antioch contained blacks as well as Jews, M. Green, Evangelism Now & Then (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 39.

## Gender Prejudice

Gender prejudice was a serious problem in the ancient world, Israel not excluded. A wife was considered by society at large to be the property of her husband, and this attitude is especially prominent in the OT (Ru. 4:5).<sup>67</sup> In about 150 A.D., the inferiority of women in Jewish society is depicted in the deprecating words of Rabbi Juda ben Elai:

“One must utter three doxologies everyday: Praise God that he did not create me a heathen! Praise God that he did not create me a woman! Praise God that he did not create me an illiterate person.”<sup>68</sup>

Women were taught merely to pray, “Praise God that he created me.

In the Roman state, women were confined to domesticity and obscurity. They were often not even given personal names but had only family names with feminine endings. Thus, two daughters in the same family might be called “Julia the elder” and “Julia the younger”, both from the family name Julius.<sup>69</sup> Hellenistic culture was hardly better. Demosthenes (385-322 B.C.) tersely explained:

“We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure; we have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation; we have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately.”<sup>70</sup>

The ideal for womanhood and manhood in the Bible, however, exists on a different level. Man and woman stand on equal ground before their Creator!

## The Creation Account

The creation of humankind in Genesis 2:7, 20b-23 is instructive, especially in the choice of Hebrew vocabulary.

2:7

When Yahweh formed the human from clods of dirt, the word used is *ha-adam* (= the human). This is the collective Hebrew word for humankind, and it does not carry male or female overtones. It is often translated “man”, but this must be understood to be generic man.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Note that the Hebrew verb *ganah* (= to buy) is used not only of the land, but also of Ruth, the widow.

<sup>68</sup> P. K. Jewett, *MAN as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 92.

<sup>69</sup> E. M. Burns, et. al., *World Civilizations: Their History and Their Culture*, 6th ed. (New York: Norton, 1982) I:256.

<sup>70</sup> W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 1:153.

<sup>71</sup> Brown, Driver & Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

2:18, 20b

The phrase “suitable helper” does not mean a subordinate or second-class being. Literally, the Hebrew complement means “alongside Him” or “corresponding to him.”<sup>72</sup> It is a statement of equality, not hierarchy.

2 : 21-23

It is here that maleness and femaleness are brought about and described as *ish* (= man or husband) and *isshah* (= woman or wife).

The same basic equality between man and woman is preserved in the earlier but briefer account of Genesis 1:26-27. Here, again, God created man (*adam* = humanity) as (*zachar* = male) and (*n'qevah* = female).

### **The Ideal Woman (Pro. 31:10-31)**

Even in the OT, which was dominated by a patriarchal society, there is an ideal for wifely excellence, a lady who is the trusted partner of her husband (31:11-12). She has money to invest (31:16), she is a shrewd business person (31:18, 24) and is a wise buyer (31:13-14). She is industrious (31:15, 17, 19), responsible (31:27) and far-sighted (31:21-22). She has the right to be generous with her earnings (31:20) and is intellectually capable (31:26). She contributes to her husband's honor (31:23), and he in turn contributes to hers (31:28). She is sincere in her devotion to God (31:30) and respected in the community (31:31).

### **Jesus and Women**

Even though women's position in society was low indeed in the first century, Jesus adopted an almost revolutionary attitude to the female gender. He accepted women as disciples and travel-companions along with the Twelve (Lu. 8:1-3) guaranteeing their security by his strong rule of chastity (Mt. 5:28). He spoke to women as equals (Jn. 4:7-9) and refused to tolerate the degrading suggestions of male prejudice (Lu. 7:36-50). He turned the tables on an unbalanced legal system that favored male offenders over female offenders (Jn. 8:1-11). One of the greatest confessions of faith, every bit as potent as that of Simon Peter (Mt. 16:16), is found on the lips of Martha (Jn. 11:27). The faithfulness of his loyal women disciples stands in sharp contrast to the fearfulness of the Twelve (Mt. 26:56; Lu. 23:27; Jn. 19:25). Furthermore, it is to women that Jesus first appeared so that they might be witnesses of his resurrection (Jn. 20:11-18). Jesus' attitude toward women is

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n.d.), 9; G. von Rad, Genesis, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 57.

<sup>72</sup> E. A. Speiser, Genesis (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 17.

admirably summed up by Dorothy Sayers:

“They had never known a man like this man--there never had been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as ‘The women, God help us!’ or ‘The ladies, God bless them’; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything ‘funny’ about woman’s nature.”<sup>73</sup>

### **The Abolition of a Gender Preference (Ga. 3:28)**

Paul’s basic ethic regarding the prejudicial categories of his world was that they no longer had any place in the Christian community. If God’s people are no longer under a law which permitted racial, social and sexual hierarchical values, and they aren’t (Ga. 3:23-25), and if persons are justified before God on the basis of faith alone, and they are (Ga. 3:26), and if all believers, regardless of race, gender or station, have been clothed with Christ in baptism, and they have been (Ga. 3:27), then the implications are clear. There cannot any longer exist racial, social or sexual prejudices. All believers are one in Jesus Christ!

### **Paul’s Gender Ethic**

In any discussion of gender prejudice, the question naturally arises regarding Paul’s famous ambivalence regarding women. If there are to be no male or female prejudices in the community of faith, as Paul so clearly urges (Gal. 3:28), why then does he reiterate household codes and an apparently hierarchical view of male and female roles? It is this question we must address here.

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<sup>73</sup> D. Sayers, Are Women Human? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 47

*Paul's Apparent Egalitarianism*

Gal. 3:28 There is neither male nor female in Christ

Ro. 16:1 Phoebe, a deaconess at Cenchrea and the official courier of the Roman epistle

Ro. 16:3 Priscilla, a fellow worker whose name appears first before her husband's, a striking fact in Greek syntax<sup>74</sup>

Ro. 16:7 Junias, an apostle who was converted prior to Paul (before 33 A.D.)

Ro. 16:6, 12 Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis, women workers in the church

I Co. 11:5 Women taking active roles in public worship at Corinth

Ep. 5:21 Wives and husbands practicing mutual submission

Phil. 4:2-3 Euodia and Syntyche, laborers in evangelism

I Ti. 3:11 Instructions regarding the character and reputation of women deaconesses<sup>75</sup>

(To the above should be added the facts of women who were gifted to prophesy and to teach, cf. Ac. 2:17; 21:9; 18:26)

*Paul's Apparent Hierarchicalism*

I Co. 11:3 Man is the head of woman

I Co. 14:33b-35 Women are enjoined to silence in public worship

Ep. 5:22-24 Household code regarding female submission

Col. 3:18 Household code regarding female submission

I Ti. 2:11-15 Women are enjoined to silence and submission; they are forbidden to teach or to have authority over men

Titus 2:3-5 Women are enjoined to be submissive and to stay at home

What are we to make of this data? In our reading of the evidence, we can at least be settled on one thing. The NT affirms the basic equality, worth and dignity of women in relation to men. The question is not, "Is there a hierarchy of value," but rather, "Is there a hierarchy of roles?"

*The Search for a Central Ethic*

Because the evidence points in two directions, Bible interpreters are obliged to treat one of the emphases as a central norm, to treat the other as exceptional, and then to explain why the exceptions are made. In brief, here is the theological parting of the ways:

Hierarchicalism As the Norm: Some interpreters defend hierarchicalism as the

<sup>74</sup> M. Black, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 179-180.

<sup>75</sup> This passage may refer either to wives of deacons or deaconesses, depending on the translation's preference.

norm. As such, a woman is to be under the authority of her father or her husband as far as the family is concerned, and under the authority of men in general as far as the church is concerned. Women cannot hold church offices, cannot function as leaders and are obligated to stay at home. Biblical passages that seem to go against this reduction of women's roles are explained otherwise. Galatians 3:28, for instance, is shifted to either the sphere of the heavenly hereafter or is rationalized by saying it only applies to spiritual values but not to practical roles. Greek vocabulary which would seem to put women in official roles in the church are often translated so that the implications are obscure. Romans 16:1 is a good case in point where the Greek titles *diakonos* (= deacon) and *prostasis* (= protector) (normally used to describe official capacities) are downplayed as "servants" and "helpers."<sup>76</sup> Sometimes evidence of an exceptional nature is simply ignored outright. Others attempt to mitigate this harshness by allowing women to teach Sunday School, to do missionary work, and so forth, as long as their work is under male authority or as long as no males are available.

Egalitarianism As the Norm: Those who favor the equal rights and roles of women in both church life and domestic life take the other side as the central norm. Galatians 3:28 is particularly the clearest articulation of how roles ought to be understood inasmuch as this is the only statement that is directly based on the gospel. Other statements, such as household codes, the restriction of women from public speech, the prohibition against female teachers, and so forth, are interpreted as exceptions to the gospel norm. They are temporary expedients aimed at avoiding the disruption of the social order, much as are the injunctions regarding slavery. Paul did not advocate either slavery or female inferiority, but in the interests of evangelism, he was willing to temporarily suspend his ideals in order to preach the gospel.<sup>77</sup> Prohibitions against women, therefore, are local and situational injunctions, not universal norms.

### *Factors to Be Considered in Reading the Evidence*

The Definition of Headship: It is very frequently assumed that the idea of headship in the NT means superiority and authority (I Co. 11:3; Ep. 5:23). This assumption is anachronistic and probably not correct inasmuch as the modern notion of authority associated with the brain was lacking in the ancient world. Rather, 'head' here probably means sources or 'origin', a

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<sup>76</sup> E. S. Fiorenza, In Memory of Her (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 47-48.

<sup>77</sup> P. Richardson, Paul's Ethic of Freedom (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 75-78, 85-90.

meaning well attested in Koine Greek.<sup>78</sup> The allusion is not to a hierarchy of subordination but to the creation account in which God took woman from man (Ge. 2:22).<sup>79</sup> Certainly the fact that God is the head of Christ cannot mean that Christ is less than God!

#### The Relationship Between Women's Roles, Slavery and the Jewish-Gentile Issue:

It is significant that in both Pauline emphases, whether egalitarian or hierarchical, the question of women's roles is juxtaposed with the questions of slave-master relationships and Jewish-Gentile relationships. All of these were cultural dominant-submissive categories in Paul's world. In Galatians 3:28 he asserts that there are no longer slave-master categories in Christ (Of. Col. 3:11). He encourages slaves to gain their freedom if possible (I Co. 7:21). At the same time, he urges them to be obedient to their masters just as they would to Christ (Ep. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22). If one is to argue that women must necessarily be subordinate to men, then to be consistent one must also argue in favor of the institution of slavery--which is precisely what was done in the South during the Civil War.<sup>80</sup> On the other hand, if one views the institution of slavery as a social evil which was only temporarily tolerated by Paul to avoid social disintegration, then there is room for the same answer to be given to the question of women's roles.

The same could be said of the Jewish- Gentile question, where Paul firmly stands against the circumcision of Gentiles (Gal. 2:1-5; Ac. 15:1ff.). Later, however, he had Timothy circumcised to appease the Jews (Ac.16:3)

One thing is clear; Paul's ambivalence does not only affect the question of women's roles but also the question regarding the institution of slavery and the question of Jewish superiority over Gentiles. These three issues cannot be neatly severed as though they were unrelated.

#### *Paul's Central Concern-the Gospel*

In my thinking, the decision regarding women's roles must be made seriously before God and with a thorough examination of the biblical evidence. However one concludes, he or she must seek not to ignore important data. Some treatments of the question do just that, such as, the ultraconservative position that women have no rights whatever and are only the bond-slave of their husbands.<sup>81</sup>

Is there a harmonizing principle that can explain this curious ambivalence of

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<sup>78</sup> F. F. Bruce, I & II Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) , 103.

<sup>79</sup> B. and A. Michelsen, "The 'Head' of the Epistles," Christianity Today, 20 February 1981, 20ff.

<sup>80</sup> H. C. Kee, F. W. Young and K. F. Froelich, Understanding the New Testament, 3rd. ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, (1973) , 287.

<sup>81</sup> E. R. Hanford, Me? Obey Him? (Murfreesboro TN: Sword of the Lord, 1972).

Paul? In all three of the dominant-submissive categories of Galatians 3:28, Paul seems to go one way on one occasion and another way on other occasions. I think that his seeming ambivalence can be harmonized by understanding his central concern in I Co. 9:19-23. “Paul’s behavior is rescued from being unprincipled by one thing alone: his goal.”<sup>82</sup> He is guided by the all-encompassing principle that he will not allow secondary issues to cloud the primary issue--the preaching of the gospel. Paul willingly accommodates himself to the mores of society as far as is necessary “for the sake of the gospel.” If the questions of slavery, cultural practices and women’s rights obscure the good news about Jesus, Paul was willing to forego addressing these issues in preference for the primary cause, the gospel. This does not mean that Paul had nothing to say to these issues. To the contrary, he unequivocally declares his position in Galatians 3:28. Nevertheless, in practical situations Paul was flexible enough to forego his convictions for the present.

During the Civil War, the preachers of the American South were caught in the unfortunate position of defending an institution because of a misplaced loyalty to Paul. Paul had tolerated slavery because society favored it, and they championed slavery even though society was against it. Is it possible that this same reversal of circumstances has occurred in the questions of women’s roles?

## **Social Prejudice**

Most societies in the ancient world were class societies, that is, societies in which one was born into a social caste for better or for worse. There was little upward mobility. Various kinds of class divisions have been proposed:<sup>83</sup>

- ♦ The rich, the poor, the inbetween (Aristotle)
- ♦ The wage workers and the capitalists (Karl Marx)
- ♦ Those who live on the land, those who labor for wages, and those who profit by trade (Adam Smith)
- ♦ The workers who struggle for subsistence and the wealthy who are conspicuous consumers (Thorstein Veblen)

Various factors affect social class boundaries, such as, money, education, occupation, culture, attitudes, values, age and lifestyle.

## **The Social Evolution of Israel**

In a semi-nomadic civilization, such as was Israel’s in her earliest periods, there were primarily individuals and families and only a limited social strata. Even

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<sup>82</sup> Richardson, 87.

<sup>83</sup> Horton and Hunt, *Sociology*, 2nd.ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968) , 235.

slaves, if owned, merely formed a part of the family.<sup>84</sup> This nearly classless society changed rapidly with settlement into an agrarian lifestyle. Villages and eventually cities arose to distinguish between landholding farmers and tradespeople. The rise of the monarchy created royal, civil and military classes. Upper and lower classes developed with both rich and poor. By the 8th century B.C., there had evolved a social about-face from the days of semi-nomadic life. Prosperity was the all-consuming goal. Land-grabbing (Is. 5:8; Mi. 2:2), speculation (Am. 8:4-6), bribery (Is. 1:22-23; Mi. 3:11; 7:3) and foreclosure (Am. 2:6-7) were common. It became a “dog-eat-dog” society (Jer. 5:26-28). The prophets arose to condemn this decadence which was gained at the expense of the lower classes (Am. 3:15; 5:11; 6:4-7; Is. 3:16-24; 5:11-12).

### **The Attempt to Maintain Social Balance**

It is clear that God did not intend his people to so evolve into such a class society. Various warnings and measures were instituted in Israel’s law to prevent such a condition (cf. Ex. 22:22-24; 23:6-9; Deut. 15:7-11). Laws regarding collateral (Deut. 24:10-13) , wages (Deut. 24:14-15), land use (Ex. 23:11) and debt tenures (Deut. 15:1-3) were aimed at preventing a widening rift between social classes (Deut. 10:17-18; 15:4). Land could not be sold permanently, and a 50 year statute of limitation was set on all land contracts (Lev. 25:8-38). Farm produce was regulated so that the poor might have access to the surplus (Lev. 19:10; 23:22; 24:19-22). Aliens were to be treated as equals (Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 10:19).

### **Slavery in the Ancient World**

Slaves in the ancient world were the property of their masters by right of conquest, purchase or inheritance. They were branded, marked with tattoos or forced to wear some kind of label attached to their bodies.<sup>85</sup> Among the Greeks, slaves were not even given the status of human beings nor did they have any legal personality.<sup>86</sup> There was a ratio of about one slave for every five free persons throughout the Roman Empire in Paul’s day, and about one slave for every three free persons in Rome itself.<sup>87</sup> Caesar’s household maintained some 20,000 slaves; the average lower middle class family owned about eight.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> R. de Vaux, Ancient Israel: Social Institutions (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961) , 1:68.

<sup>85</sup> Vaux, 1:41.

<sup>86</sup> E. A. Judge, “Slave, Slavery,” The New Bible Dictionary, ed. J. D. Douglas, 2nd. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1962), 1124.

<sup>87</sup> W. G. Rollins, “Slavery in the NT,” The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume, ed. Keith Grim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 830.

<sup>88</sup> Rollins, 830.

*Slavery in the OT*

Among the Israelites, the institution of slavery was discouraged even though it was allowed in certain forms (Ex. 21:16; Deu. 24:7; II Chr. 28:8-15). The law allowed Israelites to buy non-Israelite slaves (Lev. 25:44-46), and in certain cases, Israelite soldiers were allowed to take non-Israelite wives as the spoils of war (Deu. 21:10-14; Nu. 31:17-18, 35). Also, a person could sell himself as a slave to pay his debts (Ex. 21:2-6), as restitution for thievery (Ex. 22:2-3) or because of poverty (Lev. 25:39-42).

Two things may be noted about slavery in Israel. First, slavery was a common institution in the ancient world, and while Mosaic law regulated its practice in Israel, it certainly did not institute the practice. Second, slavery in Israel was generally more humane than in the surrounding nations. This does not justify slavery as an institution, but at least it shows an attitude in the right direction.

*Slavery in the NT*

As the Christian church moved beyond Palestine into the Hellenistic world, it ran full tilt into a world economic system which had slavery as its base. It is here that the roots of slavery began to be attacked -- not in political activism but in a fundamental change of attitude toward fellow-creatures. In the new community of faith, slavery had lost its meaning (I Co. 7:21-22; Gal. 3:28). True, the earliest Christians did not abolish slavery immediately, but there was a basic change in the attitudes and relationships of both slaves and masters (Ep. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22--4:1; I Ti. 6:1-2). Paul's implied plea for the manumission of Onesimus, a run-away slave, was revolutionary in the ancient world (Plm 8-10, 15-21).<sup>89</sup> In this way, the early Christians clearly branded slavery as an institution which was passing away in view of the liberating gospel.

**The Sin of Social Favoritism**

Social discrimination is foreign to faith in Jesus Christ (Ja. 2:1-4). Favoritism is a serious sin, the sin of judgmentalism (Ja. 2:8-11), and it stands diametrically opposed to the gospel which gives freedom (Ja. 2:12-13). Many of the earliest Christians were from the lower social strata (I Co. 1:26-31), but they all stood on equal ground before God (Col. 3:9—14).

**An Assessment**

Christians have been far too slow in recognizing the liberating implications of the gospel. During the American Civil War, more than one southern preacher

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<sup>89</sup> R. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 144-147.

attempted to justify slavery by the Bible. The issues of racial, gender and social prejudice are all related (Ga. 3:28). Just because the task of eliminating prejudice was not completed by the church of the first century does not mean that Christians today have the right to be apathetic. Rather, we should continue what the early Christians began!

It is also important to note the difference between a Christian approach to liberation and a humanistic one. Humanism's call for human equality and rights is grounded in an existential decision, not upon moral absolutes. The humanist's decision for equal rights is betrayed by his world view of biological accidentalism. He has no other reason to uphold human rights and to fight against prejudice than an irrational leap in the dark. The Christian, on the other hand, believes in human dignity, human worth, human equality and human rights because of a common Creator and a common Redeemer. He or she has an absolute base for moral categories - the sovereignty of God!

## **The Problem of Religious Superiority**

The uniqueness of the Christian faith as a system of belief based on God's authoritative self-revelation in Jesus Christ is something which cannot be denied without changing the whole answer to the question of what it means to be a Christian in the first place. There are not many ways, but one way--and Jesus Christ is that one way (Jn. 14:6)

However, though Christians agree on this uniqueness and exclusiveness, they yet maintain a variety of differences about specific aspects of Christian faith and practice which often become causes for rivalry, division and what may be called the "religious superiority complex." It is strange but true that religious people are often the most intolerant people. Christians can and often do practice the sin of religious superiority toward other Christians. This posture can arise from several sources of which the following are important examples.

### **Religious Superiority Based on Holiness**

With roots in the Great Awakening in early America and arising in the post-Civil War era, a grass roots religious awakening, often called the "holiness movement", profoundly affected conservative Protestantism. In a series of camp meetings, publications and local revival meetings, the holiness crusade found great acceptance, especially in the South and the Midwest. One of its emphases was on personal holiness, that is, a Christian lifestyle that sternly rejected "worldly" fashions, entertainment, drinking, dancing, parties, theatre-going, card playing, swearing and so forth. The lists of taboos became longer and more radical until, by the end of the 19th century, an urgent call was made to holiness proponents to abandon their

Christian denominations all together. Nothing was safe from the condemning label “worldly”, including even doctors and coffee.<sup>90</sup>

Today, there are dozens of denominations with heritages in the holiness movement. Without wishing to disregard the positive effects of this movement, it must be frankly admitted that the holiness movement deserted the NT teaching of Christian liberty and developed into a judgmental and legalistic system augmented by an intense concern for piety that far outstripped its concern for sound biblical interpretation.

### **The NT Concept of Christian Liberty**

The NT teaching on Christian liberty arises against a background of the infiltration of Jewish scruples into Gentile Christianity (Ac. 15:1-2, 5-6; Ga. 2:1-5; Col. 2:8, 16-23). Against this infiltration the apostles took a firm stand for Christian freedom (Ac. 15:8-11, 19, 24-29; Gal. 1:6-7, 10; 2:15-16, 21; 4:8-11, 17, 21, 30; 5:1-10; Col. 1:12, 21-22, 28; 2:10). It was not that Christians were free from responsibility, for they were obliged to follow Jesus Christ (Gal. 5:13-26; Col. 3:1-14). At the same time, they were free to work out the ethical implications of their salvation as individuals and as local congregations (Phil. 2:12-13).

### **Differences in Behavioral Standards**

The very fact that individual Christians were free in Christ to make ethical decisions meant that not all Christians would decide the same on all issues. A particularly thorny question was the problem of meat consecrated to pagan deities.

#### *Meat Consecrated to Pagan Deities*<sup>91</sup>

There were several ways in which Christians might come into contact with food that had its origin in pagan sacrifices. The open markets often stocked meat that came from pagan temples, and sometimes at a reduced price. Pagan worshipers often used part of the meat of consecrated animals to give dinner parties for friends. Trade guilds provided annual banquets, held in the temple of their patron deity, and the meat was consecrated meat. A common belief was that evil spirits gained entrance into an individual by settling on his food and being ingested, and meat was consecrated to pagan deities to gain divine protection from such demon possession.

#### *The Strong and the Weak*

Some Christians recognized that since pagan deities were not truly gods in the

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<sup>90</sup> V. Synan, The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 33-54.

<sup>91</sup> 30 M. Thrall, I and II Corinthians (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 61-62; W. Barclay, The Letters to the Corinthians, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 71-74.

first place, eating consecrated meat was innocuous (I Co. 8:7). Therefore, Paul advised that knowledge must give place to love when one is accompanying individuals who he knows to be weak Christians (I Co. 8:1-3, 9-13; 10:23-24). On the other hand, a believer should not go out of his or her way to capitulate to the fears of the weak Christian (I Co. 10:25-33). The Christian with a strong faith (one that is not too fussy) must not sneer at the one who has weak faith and vice versa (Ro. 14:1-4). The decision about what to do and what not to do is between the individual and God (Ro. 14:5-12). Paul himself was a “strong” Christian (Ro. 14:14a), but he fully concedes that “weak” Christians should not go against their consciences (Ro. 14:14b). Therefore, tolerance, forbearance and accommodation are the order of the day for the sake of love (Ro. 14:13, 15-21; 15:5-7). What one believes about scruples is a private matter as long as his beliefs do not cause someone else to reject the Christian faith (Ro. 14:22--15:1-2)

It is important to note that when Paul speaks of “offending” a fellow Christian, he is speaking of offending someone’s faith to the point of rejecting the Christian gospel (I Co. 8:10-11, 13; 10:32-33; Ro. 14:15, 21). The above passages may not be used to support petty behavioral codes that have no clear biblical definitions. To the contrary, over-fussiness is itself wrong (I Co. 10:25-30)

### *The Inconsistency of Holiness Judgmentalism*

One of the serious flaws in many holiness emphases is the inconsistency of the taboos. Certain behaviors (like smoking, for instance) become rigorously attacked like the devil himself, but other equally destructive behaviors (like gluttony and materialism) receive less attention. Furthermore, there is frequently an over-emphasis on external sins and an under-emphasis on internal ones. Envy, jealousy, division and bitterness rarely get the same attention as do the more obvious evils of alcohol, certain clothing fashions and adornments. The hypocrisy of the Pharisees is thus still very much alive (Mt.23:23-28)

### *The Shift from Grace to Works-Righteousness*

The most disturbing factor in holiness judgmentalism is its distortion of the gospel from salvation by grace to salvation by human effort. No one says it clearer than Paul as he fought against the infiltration of the notion that human effort must be added to God’s free gift of salvation (Ro. 11:5-6; Ga. 1:6-10; 2:4-5; Col. 2:8, 16-17, 20-23). This shift toward legalism is in reality a show of contempt for God’s tolerance (Ro. 2:1-6). Therefore, such judgmentalism is inappropriate (Ro. 14:3-4, 10-13, 20; Ga. 5:13-15, 26; 6:3-5).

### *The Misuse of Scripture*

One further comment should be made. Holiness judgmentalism often attempts

to buttress the legitimacy of its taboos by faulty exegesis. For instance, a Mosaic ordinance against transvestitism (Deu. 22:5) is pressed into service to forbid women wearing slacks. Similarly, I Peter 3:1-4, a passage addressing Christian wives who have non-Christian husbands, is distorted into a taboo against jewelry.

### **Religious Superiority Based on Mystical Experience**

Mysticism is the belief that an individual may have direct communion and/or interaction with ultimate reality, and in the case of Christianity, direct communion and/or interaction with God through the Holy Spirit. Such experience enables the worshiper to receive direction, knowledge or power so that he or she is able to transcend the ordinary and mundane. Revelations, miracles, ecstatic moods and inspired utterances are often the phenomena of mysticism.

Christianity exhibits the mystical in several areas. With roots in the OT, the belief that God's Spirit comes upon people to enable them to do, hear or understand things in a supernatural way permeates the life of Jesus and the careers of the apostles. Christians do not agree as to whether the Holy Spirit's activity functions in a largely subliminal way, in largely conscious awareness or in both, but at least some kinds of mystical phenomena are certainly conscious to the one who experiences them. The fact remains that mystical experience is part of the character of Christianity, whether associated with the Lord's Table, spiritual gifts, guidance in Christian living or other areas.

Our concern here is not to analyze the nature of the mystical element within Christianity, but to point out that mystical experience does not elevate a Christian to superiority over fellow Christians who have not experienced a particular mystical event.

### **The Charismatic Pride in Corinth**

One of the serious problems Paul addressed in Corinth was the notion of superiority based on certain charismatic gifts. From the amount of space devoted to it in I Corinthians 14, the gift of tongues seems to have been especially elevated. While Paul does not forbid speaking in tongues (14:39), he sharply contends with those who set themselves above other believers who do not speak in tongues (I Co. 12:12-27). No individual possesses every spiritual gift, Paul argued, nor is there any particular gift that all believers possess (12:29-30). Whatever their gifts, all believers are obliged to be motivated by love (12:31--14:1). The notion that all believers should have the same gift is as absurd as the notion that the human body is one huge hand, eye or ear (12:14-20). Such pride in charismatic experience is evidence of immaturity, not superiority (14:20), and it became one more cause for rivalry among the Corinthians (cf. 3:1-4). Speaking in tongues is primarily an experience for private

worship (14:2, 4, 14-19). In any case, it is not sufficient cause for spiritual pride or an inflated ego.

Modern Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians who wish to elevate mystical experience often do so at the expense of sound biblical interpretation. Passages such as I Corinthians 14:5, 18-19 are often partially quoted, thus giving a distorted picture of what Paul was saying. It is improper to say that Paul wished “everyone to speak in tongues” or that he was glad that he himself spoke in tongues “more than all” without giving attention to the conjunctive clauses which follow. Paul’s emphasis was that intelligible language was called for in public worship. He was not attempting to encourage tongue-speaking per se.

It might be well to provide an analogy for Paul’s statements since they are frequently distorted. Suppose a group of children were consuming large quantities of ice cream, and one of their parents spoke up and said, “I wish all of you to eat ice cream, but I would rather have you eat a balanced meal.” Would we then say that the parent was attempting to urge everyone to eat ice cream? Hardly! No more was Paul attempting to urge everyone to speak in tongues when he said, “I wish all of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy” (I Cor. 14:5).

In a similar way, someone might say, “I take more naps than any of you, but when I’m with a group, I would rather spend five minutes awake than an hour asleep.” Would we then say that he was urging everyone to take more naps? No more was Paul urging more tongues-speaking when he said, “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you, but in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue” (I Co. 14:18-19)

### **Colossian Mysticism**

In addition to the problem of legalism in Colossae (2:16-17, 20-23), there was also the problem of mysticism. Certain parties in the church were setting themselves apart as superior because they worshiped angels and received visions (“taking his stand on visions” - RSV). It is probable that these visions were understood to be a source of esoteric knowledge, much like the claims of those who boast of private revelations from God (cf. Jer. 23:25).<sup>92</sup> Inflated with conceit, these self-proclaimed superiors took the attitude that believers who had not had such marvelous experiences were disqualified and inferior. If they really wanted to be “full”, they needed more. Paul, for his part, stressed that all fullness was in Christ (2:10) and that the mystics had lost their connection with Jesus Christ, the head (2:19).

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<sup>92</sup> R. Martin, Colossians, 94-95.

## Weakness is the Sole Ground of Christian Boasting

Perhaps the best conclusion to the false pride of superiority based on mysticism is to be found in Paul's struggles with his opponents in II Corinthians (13:3). Though our information about them is confined to what we can glean from the letter itself, we know that they were Jews (11:22) who held Paul in contempt for various reasons, including the charges that he was "worldly" (10:2), that he lacked oratorical polish and personal charisma (10:10) and that he fell short of what they considered to be the sufficient level of extraordinary powers and mystical phenomena. This latter accusation becomes clear when we realize that Paul's "boasting" is prompted by the preposterous claims of his enemies (11:10-12, 16-19). Thus, it is by the nature of Paul's "boasts" that we can understand the claims of his opponents. These claims included visions and revelations (12:1) and miracles (5:12; 12:11-12).

### *Paul's Denunciation*

Paul's denunciation of those who claim superiority due to spiritual experiences is dripping with sarcasm (10:1; 11:5, 19; 12:13). He does not hesitate to consider their message to be a perversion of the true gospel (11:3-6). Neither does he hesitate to label them as false apostles (11:13-15). He considers their teachings as exploitation and enslavement (11:20; 12:17-18).

### *Paul's "Boasting"*

Since Paul had his own share of mystical experiences, we must not condemn them outright as though they were wrong in themselves (Ac. 9:12; 16:9; 18:9; 22:17-21; 23:11; 27:23-24; I Co. 14:15, 18). However, there is a very great difference in saying that Christians can have mystical experiences and that they ought to have them, or alternately, that they are spiritually superior if they do have them. At no time did Paul ever make his powerful experiences a part of the Christian proclamation. They were for him a private domain and unworthy of boasting. In fact, Paul's boasting about his own mystical experiences in II Corinthians is not an attempt to compete with his opponents' mysticism but an illustration of the fact that even though he was himself fully qualified to boast of mystical experiences, he steadfastly refused to do so (11:17; 12:6).<sup>93</sup> Paul's boasting about mystical experience is intended as an irony. His real boasts are of his weaknesses because they provided the real arena for the exercise of Christ's power (11:30; 12:5, 9-10; 13:4). Thus, he boasted of his:

- ♦ "weakness" in being timid (10:1/this, of course, is a sarcasm toward his enemies' accusations)

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<sup>93</sup> P. Hughes, Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 428-429.

- ♦ “weakness “ in refusing financial support (11:7-11/another sarcasm)
- ♦ “weakness “ in refusing to be exploited (11:20-21a/yet another sarcasm)
- ♦ weakness in being persecuted and in suffering physical hardships during his evangelistic tours (11:23-27)
- ♦ weakness in facing the pressures of ministry (11:28)
- ♦ weakness in empathizing with other believers’ temptations (11:29)
- ♦ weakness in the ignominy of escape (11:32-33)
- ♦ weakness through a “thorn in the flesh” (12:7-9/most scholars believe that Paul’s description is of a physical malady)

Paul is very clear that boasting about mystical experiences is profitless (12:1) and that the retelling of them is the talk of fools (11:17; 12:11). These kinds of boasts inevitably lead to factions, and Paul was fearful that the Corinthians would succumb to such division (12:20).

In conclusion, it is to be observed that a personal mystical experience, while it is difficult to deny, cannot be universalized precisely because it is personal. It must never be used as a claim to spiritual superiority. Certain kinds of vocabulary suggest such an attitude of superiority and should be avoided, vocabulary such as “spirit-filled” and “full gospel.” All genuine believers are filled with the Holy Spirit, and a particular kind of mystical experience cannot make the gospel any fuller than it already is.

### **Religious Superiority Based on Theological Impeccability**

There is no question but that the NT urges believers toward sound teaching. Perhaps II Timothy illustrates this charge as well as any other NT document. Paul’s career was virtually over and his martyrdom loomed near. The emperor Nero seemed determined to crush all groups he did not understand, of which Christianity was one. A mass apostasy from Paul’s teachings had occurred in Asia (1:15). Timothy was called upon to fill the gap--to guard the gospel, to be willing to suffer for it, to continue to proclaim it, and to entrust it to faithful disciples who could succeed him (1:8, 13-14; 2:2, 15, 17-18; 3:8-9, 14; 4:1-5).

At the same time, there was the danger that the gospel would be distorted, not only by false teaching, but by the elevation of secondary issues over primary ones. Paul knew that this sort of theological hair-splitting would devastate the church.

### **Theological Hair-Splitting**

Paul employs the verb *logomachein* (= “to dispute about words”, II Ti. 2:14), the expression *bebelous kenophonias* (= “godless, empty talk”, II Ti. 2:16), and the

noun *antithaseis* (= “objections” or “contradictions”, I Ti. 6:20) in his discussion about futile arguments.<sup>94</sup> What he is warning against is the disruptive approach to doctrine which is obsessed with technical discussions of secondary matters.<sup>95</sup> Such approaches claim an exclusive grasp of true knowledge and end up missing or minimizing the essential and primary areas of Christian faith. The aged apostle urges Timothy to avoid such hair-splitting and to deal gently with those who engage in opposing him (II Ti. 2:23-26). However, to Titus he makes clear that if such a person becomes divisive, he must sever relations (Tit. 3:9-11).

The Protestant Reformers recognized that while Scripture is sufficient, it is not all equally clear. In opposition to those who claimed that they possessed the ability to make all obscurities clear, the Reformers frankly admitted that their human limitations prevented them from always knowing exactly what was meant, as in for instance, I Corinthians 15:29. Therefore, obscure passages in Scripture must give way to clear passages! The essential elements of the Christian faith are not tucked away in some incidental remark in the Bible that remains ambiguous. The central doctrinal elements of Christian faith are dealt with extensively. Subjects which are not dealt with extensively or about which the Bible makes no comment are secondary.<sup>96</sup> It is well to remember that the kingpins in any cultic machine are the obscurities in the Bible.

## Restorationism

At various times in church history, there have been Christians who have attempted to “get back to the early church.” Generally speaking, they have organized themselves around some particular aspect of primitive Christianity, whether real or imagined, and felt that they have discovered the key to apostolicity. Whatever the group or the issue, each claimed to have the “truth” of primitive Christianity. Some of these restoration movements may be seen in:

- ♦ Anabaptists (who insisted that those who were baptized as infants must be rebaptized)
- ♦ Pietists (who argued for deeper spiritual experiences)
- ♦ Quakers (whose worship was led by the “inner light” of the Spirit)
- ♦ Darbyites (who claimed to have the only correct view of biblical history)
- ♦ Landmark Baptists (who claimed to be the only true church)

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<sup>94</sup> F. W. Gingrich, Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965), 127, 37, 18.

<sup>95</sup> J. R. W. Stott, Guard the Gospel: The Message of II Timothy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973), 69.

<sup>96</sup> B. Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 55, 104-106.

- ♦ Holiness groups (who viewed other Christian groups as “Babylon”)
- ♦ Pentecostals (who argued that all believers should speak in tongues)

Without decrying any positive contributions of restorationist groups, and while affirming that the Christian church must always be open to reformation in light of the authority of the NT, we must still warn against the not infrequently adopted posture of exclusivism, an exclusivism that says: “We only are the true church, we only have true apostolicity, we only have the full truth, or we only can be saved.” Such a stance is almost always accompanied by an appalling lack of self-criticism and self-evaluation as well as the tendency to define the early church by the group itself rather than the other way around. Other Christian groups are regarded with suspicion if not outright rejection. Theological humility is supplanted by theological perfectionism.

### **Propositional Theology**

Within a century of the Protestant Reformation, the living doctrines of the Reformers became systematized into cold and formal dogmas. The 17th and 18th centuries are usually called the era of Protestant Scholasticism, the time when true Christianity was defined primarily in the adherence to a set of carefully worded theological formulas. This kind of scholasticism, which still pervades areas of evangelicalism, presupposes that the Bible is directly available to human reason, and those who subscribe to it become rationalistic and bypass the elements of mystery, transcendence and dynamism in Scripture.<sup>97</sup> This is not to deny that Biblical revelation has a propositional dimension, but it is to say that Christians must not be afraid to allow Scripture to surprise them and change them as it becomes a vehicle of the Holy Spirit. The test of true Christianity is not merely a set of theological propositions, however carefully formulated, but it is also the active working out of the Christian faith in life responses (Ja. 1:27; Mt. 9:9-13; 12:1-8; Mk. 9:38-41; cf. Mic. 6:6-8).

In summary, no individual or group may claim theological impeccability. If the NT can allow for some amount of theological imprecision (Phil. 1:12-18; 3:15; Ep. 4:11-13), the church today must allow for such as well. This is not an excuse for theological flabbiness or latitudinarianism (Phil. 1:27; Jude 3). It is merely the honest admission that while Christians have real truth, they cannot claim to have the whole truth. They are wayfarers in theology, not residents who have arrived!

### **Religious Superiority Based on Church Tradition**

The institutional structure of the church and its major cleavages in history have

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<sup>97</sup> D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) , 1:74-78.

left Christians with a variety of church traditions, some ancient, some old and some new. There are today three major branches of institutional Christianity, none of which can trace themselves unbroken in their present form to the origin of the Christian community in the NT. They are:

- ♦ Roman Catholicism (gradually emerging from the first 5 centuries following the apostolic era)
- ♦ Eastern Orthodoxy (a gradual division in thinking between the East and the West that eventually erupted into an institutional division in the 11<sup>th</sup> century)
- ♦ Protestantism (a 16th century reaction within Roman Catholicism that became the third stream of Christian thinking)

Each of these claim to be closest to the truth of early Christianity. Besides this, there are the many independent groups which have splintered from these three major branches. Altogether, Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Independent Christians make up what is known as Christendom.

Because of the different traditions associated with these streams of thought, there easily arises not only tension but, in some cases, outright conflict (witness the current debacle in Ireland)! Even for those who refuse to engage in armed battle, there is often a more subtle kind of warfare being waged, a warfare fought with weapons of judgmentalism based on different religious traditions.

### **Types of Institutional Traditions**

Following are several types of traditions which end up separating Christians from each other. These categories do not exhaust the traditions which maintain walls of separation, but they are typical.

- ♦ Roman Catholic tradition (with claims of a direct ancestry back to the apostles, especially Peter)
- ♦ Eastern Orthodoxy (which claims to be the original and true Christian church from which Roman Catholicism separated)
- ♦ Lutheranism (with roots in the German Reformation)
- ♦ Reformed Churches (with roots in the Swiss Reformation)
- ♦ Anglican/Episcopal (with roots in the English Reformation)
- ♦ Methodism (with roots in the revivals of John Wesley)
- ♦ Evangelicalism (conservative Protestants with roots in the historic Protestant denominations from which they have often separated)
- ♦ Churches of Christ (independent churches which have developed into a separate religious culture by virtue of their common associations and teachings)

- ♦ Fundamentalists (reactionary separatists with roots in evangelicalism and mainline Protestantism)
- ♦ Pentecostals (a 20th century movement emphasizing supernatural phenomena, particularly speaking with tongues; roots are in the 19th century holiness movements and the Great Awakening)
- ♦ Charismatics (a transdenominational movement arising in the 1960s, similar to Pentecostalism but without the same behavioral codes and organizational structures)
- ♦ Calvinism (a theological tradition stressing the sovereignty of God)
- ♦ Arminianism (a theological tradition stressing human freedom)
- ♦ Dispensationalism (a theological tradition stressing the radical dichotomy of Israel and the church)

It is more the norm than the exception for each of these groups to hold their own traditions as “original” or “proper” and all others as deviants. The truth is that they all have common roots in Christian history, and none of them can trace themselves in an unbroken line to the NT community of faith. Furthermore, it is probably safe to say that they all have developed traditions which have no support in the NT. This is not to say that all tradition is wrong; it is only to point out that a sense of superiority based on tradition, however old or new, is misplaced.

### **Common Roots**

As a safeguard against religious superiority and judgmentalism based on church tradition, our common Christian roots as well as the ideal that the church is catholic (universal) should help us to stay in balance. The unity of the church was Christ’s prayer (Jn. 17:20-23) and Paul’s affirmation (Ep. 4:3-13). It was basic to the beliefs of the early Christian confessions. The Nicene creed asserts:

“We believe. . . in one holy catholic (universal) and apostolic church.”<sup>98</sup>

We can still affirm the same truth today.<sup>99</sup>

- ♦ The church is one (I Co. 12:12-13)
- ♦ The church is holy (Ep. 2:21; 5:25-27)
- ♦ The church is catholic (I Co. 1:2; Re. 5:9; 7:9-10)
- ♦ The church is apostolic (Ep. 2:20)

This is not simply a call for latitudinarianism. The church and every member in it is always called toward serious theology and the authority of Jesus Christ and

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<sup>98</sup> H. Bettenson, ed., Documents of the Christian Church, 2nd. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 26.

<sup>99</sup> See discussion in R. Webber, Common Roots (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 55ff.

Holy Scripture. At the same time, the church and every member is obliged to distinguish between primary and secondary matters and to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit . . . until we all reach unity in the faith” (Ep. 4:3, 13). The words of Clement of Rome (about A.D. 96) still challenge us:

“Wherefore are there strifes and wraths and factions and divisions and war among you? Have we not one God and one Christ and one Spirit of grace that was shed upon us? And is there not one calling in Christ? Wherefore do we tear and rend asunder the members of Christ, and stir up factions against our own body, and reach such a pitch of folly, as to forget that we are members one of another?”<sup>100</sup>

### **The Distinction Between the Church and Christendom**

Many justify their sectarianism by pointing to the distinction between the visible church and the invisible church. This is another way of distinguishing between true Christianity (made up of new creatures in Christ) and Christendom (made up of those who claim to be Christian). It must be conceded that God alone truly knows who are his own (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43; II Ti. 2:19). However, this fact must not be used to make broad generalizations toward Christian groups as though salvation itself depended upon ones’ institutional affiliation or the lack of it.

It may even be that institutional Christendom, at least as we know it, will suffer a major collapse, as some have suggested.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, even if this should happen it would not suffice to give us the right to make sweeping generalizations about Christian institutions. One is neither saved nor lost because of his or her church tradition. Alternately, one may be either saved or lost in spite of his or her church tradition.

### **A Perspective Toward Tradition, Freedom and Orthodoxy**

In every local congregation, a certain amount of tension will occur over any suggestion toward change. It matters not whether one speaks of religion, politics or some other pattern of living, the same tension is to be seen. Generally, we use the terms such as “left”, “right”, “liberal”, “conservative”, “moderate”, “radical” and/or “reactionary” to describe people’s relationship to such a tension. Some people wish to change just for the sake of change; others categorically assume that if it is old it is always better. Most of us are somewhere in the middle.

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<sup>100</sup> To the Corinthians, 46, from J. B. Lightfoot, The Apostolic Fathers) rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.), 33.

<sup>101</sup> M. Muggeridge, The End of Christendom (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) , 13-24.

### **Some Basic Definitions:**

Tradition: A tradition is an established pattern of living. It is an accepted or an inherited pattern of thinking and acting.

Freedom: Freedom is the power to think and act without compulsion.

Orthodoxy: Orthodoxy, in a Christian sense, is conforming to the established doctrine and practice of the Christian church as it is based upon Holy Scripture.

### **The New Testament and Tradition**

The NT word for tradition (*paradosis*) is to be found in three contexts:

#### *Jewish*

Here the word generally pertains to the oral law of the rabbinical system. Jesus was quite blunt in pointing out that such traditional practices and customary interpretations of Scripture not only might be incorrect, they might be directly opposed to God's purpose (Mt. 15:2, 3, 6; cf. Ga. 1:14).

#### *Pagan*

Here Paul describes the human philosophies of those who tried to syncretize their pagan concepts with the message of Christ (Col. 2:8). This sort of tradition leads to bondage, and it is hollow, deceptive and worldly.

#### *Christian*

Paul also uses this word to describe apostolic doctrine, that is, the authoritative teachings in the church that were given through the apostles under the direction of the Holy Spirit (I Co. 11:2; II Th. 2:15; 3:6)

Quite obviously, then, Jewish and pagan traditions are dispensable while Christian traditions are not.

### **Evaluating Traditions**

Everyone has traditions, and any time a change of these traditions is anticipated, it is wise to think through the change from two important perspectives. Any evaluation of traditions should answer at least two questions:

1. Is the tradition based on Scripture, and if so, is the Scripture legitimately interpreted and applied? If a practice is based on a properly interpreted and applied passage of the Bible, it should not be suppressed.
2. If the tradition is not based on Scripture, what are the advantages to be obtained by maintaining the practice, and/or what are the advantages to be

obtained by changing the practice (i.e., does it enhance or detract from one's practice of Christianity)?

### **The New Testament and Freedom**

Freedom in the NT describes the liberation of the believer from the overpowering forces of a fallen nature (Ro. 8:9), of the world (Col. 1:13), of sin (Ro. 6:22) and of a condemning law (Ro. 8:1, 2). This freedom excuses the believer from being bound to traditional practices that do not derive from the teaching of Christ and the apostles (Ac. 15:19, 20, 28, 29; Ga. 5:1; Col. 2:16, 20-23, etc.).

#### *Freedom is Neither License Nor Anarchy*

“License “ refers to the liberty one has to break the laws. While the Christian is not bound to Mosaic law, he is bound to Christ (I Co. 9:20, 21), and therefore, his or her freedom does not equal license. He or she may not ignore God's purposes with impunity. “Anarchy” refers to the state of being without law at all. Clearly the believer is not free to be lawless (I Ti.1:8-11)

#### *Christian Freedom is to be Controlled by NT Principles*

The following principles should be used when evaluating a traditional practice and/or a newly suggested practice:

- ♦ Is love the primary motivation (Ro. 13:8-10)?
- ♦ Is it beneficial (I Co. 6:12a)?
- ♦ Will it tend to control me (Ga. 5:1; I Co. 6: 13b)?
- ♦ Will it avoid offending the faith of someone else (I Co. 8:13; 10:32, 33)?
- ♦ Does it glorify God (I Co. 10:31)?
- ♦ Will it be an aid in the sharing of the gospel (I Co. 9:19-23)?

### **A Case in Point - The Lord's Day<sup>102</sup>**

Sunday, the Christian day of worship, was observed from the beginning of the Christian church because it was the day upon which Christ arose from the dead, hence the name “the Lord's Day” (Ac. 20:7; I Co. 16:2; Re. 1:10). The first day of the month was called the “Emperor's Day” in the Roman Empire, and it is not hard to see how Christians customarily came to call Sunday the Lord's Day. Just exactly

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<sup>102</sup> B. S. Easton, “Lord's Day”, *ISBE* 3, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 1919-1920; R. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 78-80; C. C. Richardson, “Lord's Day”, *IDB*, 3 (1962) 151-154; Dowley, ed., *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 9, 85, 86; A. S. Wood, “Lord's Day”, *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 745-746.

how or at what precise hour the Lord's Day was celebrated we do not know. By the second century, history indicates that Christians met early Sunday morning (about dawn before they went to work) for singing, scripture reading, prayer, a sermon and communion. In the evening (after they were free from work) they met for a fellowship meal which at first probably included the communion (I Co. 11:20, 21, 33, 34; Jude 12), and on occasion, preaching (Ac. 20:7-12). In the time of Trajan (the Emperor, 98-117 A.D.), the evening meal was abandoned because of an imperial edict forbidding evening dinners of unlicensed clubs.

Thus, the day of Christian worship was established from earliest times; however, the time and manner of Christian worship was flexible.

## **To Judge or Not to Judge**

In summary of this study of judgmentalism, it will be worthwhile to observe the general attitude of the NT, that is, that the passing of judgment on others in a way that attempts to indicate their final evaluation by God belongs to God alone. Any opinion we hold is at best provisional. At the same time, we are obliged to make serious moral decisions. To refuse to be judgmental is not at all the same thing as refusing to recognize evil or to live by Christian values.

### **To Judge**

Jesus requires his disciples to make moral decisions (Lu. 12:57; Jn. 7:24; I Co. 2:15). All moral decisions are types of judgment. There are even occasions when it is advisable for Christians to settle disputes between other Christians (I Co. 6:1-6). Brazen immorality must be opposed (I Co. 5:1-5). The distortion of the gospel must be guarded against (Ga. 1:6-10; II Ti. 4:14-15; I Jn. 4:1). However, private confrontation has precedence over public disapproval (Mt. 18:15-17).

### **Not to Judge**

Jesus sternly warned against fault-finding and flaw-picking (Mt. 7:1-2). A censorious attitude is in effect a usurpation of God's divine prerogative, and if Christians wish to have mercy from God, they must show mercy to others (Lu. 6:37). Most Christians who pass judgment on others are quite oblivious to their own faults (Lu. 6:41-42). Furthermore, all humans are prone to judge superficially (Jn. 7:24). It is well to remember that none of us are worthy to sit in judgment (Ro. 2:1-6; Jn. 8:7); only God the Father is worthy for only he truly knows (Jn. 8:15-16; Ro. 2:16; I Co. 4:5; Ja. 4:11-12).