

The Unbiblical Church

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Introduction

If you take a look at the many different denominations that exist today, you will find some pretty significant differences when it comes to the doctrines that they teach. However, one thing they all seem to have in common is the way they do church. There seems to be almost universal agreement that there's only one way to have a church service. It's true there are some differences from one church to another, but those differences are largely superficial. This is very unfortunate, because I think the way we've decided to “do church” is very unbiblical. Not only is it unbiblical, but it might be one of the worst possible ways that a church service could be conducted.

What I'd like to do is take a closer look at our church services and the many problems associated with them. I want to explore what the Bible actually has to say about “doing church” – and how completely different its teachings are from the way we do things. There's an enormous gap between the Biblical church and what we have today, and it doesn't seem like very many people have noticed.

Nearly all churches hold their primary (and most important) service on Sunday morning. People from all over the city drive to a building that's universally called “the church”. They typically show up a few minutes before the service starts and take their seat. An usher at the door hands them a bulletin, which tells them exactly what's going to happen during the service. The reason the bulletin is so detailed is because the church staff has spent the entire week planning this service. They know exactly what songs are going to be sung, what prayers will be made, what the sermon is going to be about, and how long the service will last (usually within a few minutes).

The service starts out with singing, which is led by the song leader. (In many churches this is a full-time paid position.) At some point the announcements are made and the offering is

collected. Someone reads some Scripture, someone leads the congregation in prayer, and then the pastor starts his sermon. He's been working on it all week so he knows exactly what he's going to say. Usually he's prepared a PowerPoint presentation to go along with it. Once his sermon is over it's pretty common to have an "altar call", where people are asked to go to the front of the church and pray what's called "the sinner's prayer". As soon as the service is over the congregation immediately goes home.

There may be some differences from church to church, but that's very close to how all mainline Protestant churches handle their services. It doesn't matter what your denomination is: the service is going to be handled more or less the same way. Some churches may have responsive readings while others don't, but the differences are minor. No one questions the way churches do things. This is the way things have always been done, and it's widely accepted – but I don't think it's right.

If you go to church on Sunday morning, are you going to have any opportunities to meaningfully interact with another human being? Probably not. After all, most people arrive shortly before the service starts and then go home the moment it ends. If you're lucky you might be able to have a short and fairly meaningless conversation with whoever is sitting behind you (probably along the lines of "Hello!"). However, you can go to church every Sunday morning for *years* and never learn anything significant about the people who have been sitting behind you. That's just how it is. If you want to get to know people you'll have to find some other way to do it, outside of the service. (Good luck with that. It won't be easy.)

Once the service starts, you're going to spend the entire time doing exactly what you're told. You will sing whatever songs you're told to sing, and pray whatever you're told to pray. You will give when it's time to give. When the pastor starts his sermon you will listen to it quietly. The only time the congregation will speak is when the pastor tells them to repeat some phrase he has said, and then they will say exactly what the pastor told them to say. Your job in the service is to be completely passive. There's

literally nothing for you to do but sit there until it's time to go home.

Is there something you wanted to sing? Sorry, the songs are all chosen in advance. You can always sing at home, in the shower. Do you have a prayer request? Sorry, there's no time for that in the Sunday morning service (or the Sunday evening service, if your church happens to have one of those). You'll have to pray at home. Are you struggling with something in your life? Sorry, the church service isn't the place to mention that. Do you have a question about the pastor's sermon? Sorry, you can't speak up and ask him – his sermon is timed, and he has to finish at a precise moment so everyone can go home. Did the pastor make a terrible mistake and say the wrong thing? Sorry, you can't correct him. You just have to let it go, even if it means people will be misled and go away believing the wrong thing. Does the pastor's sermon cover material you already know? Sorry about that. There's nothing you can do but sit there and hope that next week he has different material.

If you don't show up at church for a month, is that going to impact the service? Nope. You weren't allowed to contribute anything anyway (except for your money). The people who normally sit behind you might notice that your spot is empty, but your absence isn't going to change the service. If half the church stayed home (which is actually pretty normal), the service would still unfold exactly as planned. The same songs would be sung, the same prayers would be prayed, and the same sermon would be given. This is because the only people who are allowed to participate in the service is the church staff (who are often paid and in full-time positions). They pick all the songs, and all the prayers, and the sermon topic. The reason you are coming is to watch a performance, not participate.

While you're there you're probably going to spend 30 minutes (or more) listening to a sermon. Was that sermon written with you in mind? Nope. Since the congregation has hundreds or even thousands of people in it, the pastor can't possibly write something that's directed at your needs. Instead he will pick a

passage from the Bible and preach on it, and hope that somehow you will find something meaningful in it. Since he's preaching to a lot of people (many of whom may be Biblically illiterate), he can't go very deep. If you've been attending church for a while it's quite likely that you've either heard that message before or you're already familiar with the passage, which means the pastor may have nothing for you at all. Also, since the pastor knows that many of the people in his congregation might not be Christians, he's going to spend time explaining the gospel and asking people to come forward and “get saved”. That's why some people try to sneak out at the end of the service – they don't want to hear the same altar call for the thousandth time.

Our church services are very strange. If you want to pray, you can do that – at home. If you want to sing, you can do that – at home. If you want to study the Bible and really dig into a passage, you can do that – at home. If you want to get to know people, you can do that – at home. If you're struggling with something, you can get help – by reaching out to someone *outside* of the service and making an appointment. (Some pastors charge for counseling, so keep that in mind.) If you have questions then you can always go home and try to look up the answers online.

Suppose that people *didn't* go to the church building on Sunday and instead remained at home and watched the service online. Would anything change? Well, from the *pastor's* perspective it would be terrible because his audience was gone. It's very difficult to preach to an empty room! However, from the *congregation's* perspective it would largely be the same. It's true they would miss out on the 15 seconds they spend saying “Hello” to that person who has set behind them for the past five years, but other than that it's pretty much the same. They would still sing what they're told, pray whatever they're told, and listen to a sermon that wasn't written with them in mind. The congregation has no way of contributing if they show up, and they also have no way of contributing if they stay home.

Suppose that instead of watching a *live* sermon, they listen to a sermon that was recorded 10 years ago by someone a

thousand miles away. Would anything change? Nope. They're still listening to a sermon that wasn't written with them in mind. They're still singing what they're told to sing and praying what they're told to pray. They're still not participating in any meaningful way. They're just passive participants, listening to a service that doesn't actually need them at all and which can go on just fine without them.

Many people never question this. After all, church services have always been this way! This is just how things are. However, the truth is that services have *not* always been this way. In fact, the services that we find in the New Testament are *completely different* from the way we do things today. Not only would the apostles not recognize our services, I suspect they would be very unhappy at what we've done. The modern church has picked what might be the worst possible way to “do church”. Let's take a look at what the Bible has to say about the subject.

The Building

Have you ever noticed that when people mention the building in which services are held, they always call it “the church”? This is universal across all denominations. If you talk to pastors about this they will eventually say that the church is really the people, and the building is just a building. The problem is that no one seems to actually believe that. In *practice* the church really is the building. (I know that's hard to believe, but by the time we reach the end of this discussion I think you'll see what I mean. Actions speak louder than words.)

If a pastor has founded a church in a new city and is meeting in a location that's not a church building, he will earnestly desire a building of his own. He will ask his congregation to make painful financial sacrifices in order to raise the enormous amounts of money that are required to purchase a building. Once he has that building, he will want to renovate it and expand it. There is no point at which the building is considered to be “large enough”: it can always be bigger and pack in more people. That's why there are church buildings that can seat thousands upon thousands of people, and which have restaurants and movie theaters and art galleries and gymnasiums. Pastors universally want to have the biggest building they possibly can. That's what they dream about. Preaching to ten thousand people every Sunday morning would be a dream come true.

Is that how things were done in the New Testament? Nope. The Bible never says that Christians should invest millions of dollars in buildings and then hold their church services there. In fact, there are no cases anywhere in the New Testament where anyone even *considered* doing such a thing! Instead churches met in people's homes:

1 Corinthians 16:19: “The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their

house.”

Colossians 4:15: “Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house.”

Philemon 1:2: “And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:”

But that was a foolish way of doing things, right? After all, the early church was poor and didn't have many options. They were also fiercely persecuted, so it would have been impossible for them to buy real-estate and construct a building! They did they best they could under the circumstances, but we live in different times. It is only right for Christians to build religious buildings wherever they can. That's how many people think – but does the Bible actually say that? The truth is, *it doesn't*.

If God wanted Christians to build church buildings He definitely could have told us. After all, in the Old Testament He commanded the Jews to build the temple. We tend to think that since God told the Jews to build the temple in the Old Testament, Christians should build religious buildings as well because God really likes buildings. The problem is there's no Scriptural support for that. God never said “Go into all the world and build million-dollar buildings”. Instead the pattern we find in the New Testament is *people meeting in homes*. In fact, that's the *only* pattern we're given!

Church buildings are actually a terrible idea. First of all, church buildings make it impossible for the pastor to do his job. What do I mean by that? Well, I think that pastors would universally agree that they're shepherds, and their job is to take care of their sheep. It's pretty clear that shepherds should model themselves after the Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ. He had a lot to say about being a shepherd:

John 10:11-14: "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine."

Jesus contrasted a good shepherd with a hireling. The good shepherd knows all of his sheep, and they know him. He cares for them and watches over them and protects them when they're in danger – even risking his own life when necessary. When one of his sheep gets in trouble, he immediately notices and goes after him:

Luke 15:4: "What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost."

Suppose that your church is meeting in someone's house, and is composed of 15 people. Can the shepherd get to know everyone? Of course! In that sort of setting everyone could learn about everyone else, and form a very close bond. Would the shepherd notice if something happened to someone? Absolutely – it would be immediately obvious.

But that's not the way modern churches are, is it? If your church has hundreds of members then it's possible the pastor may

recognize you, but that's probably going to be the extent of your interaction with him. He's not going to know much about you at all, and if you're in trouble he's not going to be aware of it. If your church has thousands or tens of thousands of members then it's quite possible he will never notice you're there at all. In a case like that, if you get in trouble you'll need to fill out a form and file it with the right person and schedule an appointment to meet with a counselor, and possibly pay a counseling fee. That means if you're a lost sheep, you will have to rescue yourself. No one is going to come looking for you because the congregation is very large, and you are too small to notice.

But house churches wouldn't have that problem, would they? Since they're small they can form a community. Since they're small, everyone can get to know everyone else. Since they're small they can become involved in one another's lives. Since they're meeting in a house it's impossible for them to grow very large – there simply isn't enough space. That forces them to remain small, *which is a good thing*.

Here's another way to look at it. The world outside the church understands that small classroom sizes are much better and more desirable than large ones. If you're a student who's trying to learn something, it's much better to be in a classroom with 30 other students than a classroom with 3000 other students. Education can be improved by reducing the ratio of students to teachers and allowing each teacher more time to work with students individually. If you are one student in a classroom with thousands of other students, it's going to be almost impossible to get much of the teacher's time – which means you're largely on your own. Large classroom sizes are very bad for students – and yet *that's precisely how our churches are designed*.

Why are they designed that way? Because the truth is the building is more important than the people. We may never say that out loud, but that's what our *actions* are saying. After all, we ask people to make great sacrifices in order to raise huge sums of money to pay for the building – and once they enter that building their reward is to be put into an enormous group and then sit

passively until the service is over and they can go home. For many congregations the upkeep on the building itself is a crippling expense. People have to pay for the building itself, and pay to maintain the building, and pay to maintain the parking lot. If they're not paying off the mortgage then they're raising money to build a new building (because building projects never end). Millions and millions of dollars are spent building very elaborate and expensive buildings that do a very poor job of serving the people.

In the Sunday morning service that's held in these large and elaborate buildings, which is the only service that most people attend, can people make prayer requests? Nope – you must do that elsewhere. Can they ask questions during the pastor's sermon? Nope – it doesn't work that way. If they want to pray or sing or study or get to know people or build relationships, they have to do it *outside the building*. The building doesn't seem to be there to serve them; instead they are there to serve the building. They would actually be much better off without it! Not only would it save them an enormous expense (which would free up money for things like missions), but it would force them to meet in small groups in people's homes.

No, I'm not suggesting that we take the Sunday morning experience and transplant that into people's homes. The building is only part of the problem. We also need to take a closer look at what we're actually doing in our services, which is what we'll discuss next.

The Service

The early church did *not* conduct services the way that we do today. They had a very different approach:

1 Corinthians 14:26-33: "How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying. If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God. Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints."

When the early church came together, everyone had a psalm to sing or something they wanted to say. Did Paul rebuke this? Nope. Instead he told them to conduct their services in an orderly manner. If people had something to say then let them say it, and let other people judge what was said. It was actually *good* for everyone to speak, one by one, so that everyone could learn and be comforted.

Did Paul say that all songs should be chosen by the song leader? Nope. In fact, the very position of “song leader” cannot be found in the New Testament! In order to find that position you need to go back to the sacrificial system. In the temple there were

priests who offered sacrifices and song leaders who led people in song – but the church wasn't designed to be like the temple. You won't find any passages in the New Testament where an apostle says “All songs must be chosen by the song leader, and everyone must do what he says. It's foolish and wrong for people to have their own songs.”

Did Paul say that only seminary-trained pastors should speak in the service, and everyone else must remain silent? Nope. Instead he encourages *everyone* to speak so that everyone can learn. There's no passage anywhere in the Bible that says “If you aren't a pastor then you have no right to say anything. Let the pastor do all the preaching. Your job is to sit there silently.” Paul seemed to think that everyone had something valuable to contribute and should be given an opportunity to say something. His only stipulation was that things should be done decently and in order.

Did Paul say that people should listen quietly to whatever the preacher said and accept it without question, because the pastor has attended seminary and you have no right to judge him? Nope. Instead Paul specifically stated that people *should* judge the message and comment on it. This means if the person who was speaking said something wrong, he could immediately be corrected.

Did Paul say that only one person is allowed to speak in a service? Nope. It may seem that “two or three” is a significant limitation, but you need to remember that New Testament churches met in very small groups in people's homes. Having three people teach in a setting where only 15 people were present is very different from having one person speak with three thousand are present (which is the situation we have today). Paul isn't saying that only the pastor has the right to speak. He's saying that things should be done in an orderly fashion.

We also need to remember that the early church met *every day*:

Acts 2:46: “And they, continuing daily with one

accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,”

Acts 5:42: “And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.”

This doesn't mean that every day people drove across town and had a Sunday morning service. Instead people would gather to the home of their friend (who lived nearby). They would sing whatever songs they wanted to sing and pray whatever they wanted to pray. If they had something going on in their life they would talk about it. The group would study the Bible for a while and discuss it, asking whatever questions were necessary. The service had no predetermined length; it would last as long as it needed to. It might be only a few minutes long, or it might last all night and into the next morning:

Acts 20:7: "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight."

No one really cared how long or short the service was. There was no danger of running out of time. The people came together to worship God, and they were going to continue until they were done. They weren't interested in setting aside a fixed block of time on Sunday morning and then sticking to that schedule so they could get back home as soon as possible.

Since this was a small group, it was easy to get together frequently. It's true that perhaps not everyone could gather every day, but they met so frequently that it wasn't a problem. Since the group was small, people could make prayer requests. Since the service wasn't timed, they had all the time they needed to sing and

pray and teach and ask questions. The sermons could be as short or long as they needed to be. If multiple people had something to share or teach then they could do it.

This meant the order of the service wasn't determined in advance. Instead it reflected the needs of the people. If someone was struggling with a problem then the group could help them. Also, in a group that small there's no need to keep sermons simple and basic. Since everyone knows everyone else, the pastor can preach sermons that address people's specific needs and situations, instead of preaching a random passage and hoping that somehow works out. In a small group it becomes possible to address specific situations – especially if everyone has the freedom to speak up and contribute.

Since so few people are participating in the service, it makes a big difference if people stop coming for a few weeks because *those people are no longer there to make their contribution*. If half the people are missing the service is going to be *very* different – and not nearly as good.

A pastor of a large church can't possibly get involved in the lives of five thousand people. However, it *is* possible for a small group to gather in someone's home and get to know one another, and become involved in each other's lives. In a setting like that you could see enormous spiritual change because you would finally be able to address the problems that people were actually having. The pastor could focus his preaching on areas where it was actually needed. He wouldn't be preaching at random anymore.

Could you imagine if a pastor preached a sermon that addressed your situation specifically? That would be impossible in a large church, but not in a small house church. Which do you think would be more helpful to the congregation: random sermons that may have nothing to do with what they're struggling with, or messages that were preached specifically with them in mind that give them the exact answers they're looking for? If the goal of the church is to have big buildings then we should probably keep doing what we're doing. However, if the goal of the church is to

help people grow spiritually and make disciples then we need a better system. Do you *really* think you can help people by preaching passages at random, instead of finding out what's actually going on in their life and using the Bible to address that situation? There may be times when it makes sense to preach the same generic message to 5000 people. However, if your goal is truly to help people grow then you need to put all your effort into having your "classroom sizes" be as small as possible so you can work with people individually and address their specific needs. The world outside the church understands this. When is the church going to learn this lesson?

I realize that some churches have what they call "small groups". That is where people meet in small groups (usually in people's homes) in order to do the things that can't be done in the Sunday morning service (like make prayer requests and ask questions). Here's my question: if you already have small groups then *why do you have anything else?* If people are already meeting in small groups in people's homes then you don't need an expensive building, with all the upkeep and maintenance that it requires. People can sing and pray and preach *in the small group*. The only thing the building provides is a chance for thousands of people to sit passively in chairs while someone preaches a generic sermon at them, *and that's precisely what we need to get away from*. I am not at all opposed to small groups (provided they aren't just "the Sunday Morning service performed on a smaller scale in a house"). I simply find it foolish to spend all that time and money on a building that you don't need *because you already have small groups*.

The Staff

One of the biggest problems in many churches is that congregations pay their pastors a full-time salary – in spite of the fact it's a huge burden on the church and puts them in a difficult financial position. Now, I realize it's not a sin to give the pastor a salary. After all, the apostle Paul does say this:

1 Corinthians 9:3-11: "Mine answer to them that do examine me is this, Have we not power to eat and to drink? Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas? Or I only and Barnabas, have not we power to forbear working? Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges? who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of the fruit thereof? or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock? Say I these things as a man? or saith not the law the same also? For it is written in the law of Moses, thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? Or saith he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?"

That's a very strong statement! Paul makes it very clear that there's nothing wrong with paying people for the spiritual services they provide. However, did Paul accept a salary from any of the churches that he ministered to? No, he did not. Instead he provided for his own financial needs by being a tentmaker so he

wouldn't be a burden to the churches. He knew it would be hard for them to pay a salary and he didn't want to burden them with his expenses. Even though Paul had every right to ask churches to pay him in return for all he did for them, he refused to exercise that right:

1 Corinthians 9:12: "If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ."

Paul chose to pay his own way because he didn't want to hinder the gospel. Paul's life would have been a lot easier if he had taken money from the churches, and he had every right to take that money, but he refused to do it. The gospel was too important to him.

There are many churches in this country that are struggling financially. Do you know what their biggest expenses are? The building and the staff. If they didn't have a building (because they met in small groups in people's homes) and they didn't have to pay their staff, they would actually be fine. In fact, without those expenses they would have plenty of money to devote to missions – *which is one of the key tasks of the church*. It's an enormous financial burden for a church to pay multiple pastors, and a youth minister, and a song leader, and a secretary, and someone to clean the building, and someone to mow the lawn. That takes a lot of money that could be spent on *actually spreading the gospel*.

But suppose we did things the way we see in the New Testament. If people met in small groups in people's homes then there would be no need to pay for a building. We wouldn't need to hire maintenance people or someone to take care of the church grounds. The pastor's job would be *much* easier because the group is small and everyone is contributing and speaking. There wouldn't be a need for him to spend 40 hours working on a

sermon, because each time the church meets (which is very often) they would talk about whatever needed to be addressed that day, or the passage of Scripture they were all studying. Sermons wouldn't have to be a predetermined length, and all of the responsibility for teaching wouldn't fall on the pastor. Since everyone was helping one another, all the work wouldn't fall on the pastor – which means he would have time to work and provide for his family. As you can see, everything changes once you get rid of the church building and start meeting in small groups in people's homes. (The next time you're given a copy of your church's budget in a business meeting, look at all the money that's being spent on salaries and the church building. Now imagine if all that money was going to missions instead. Do you see what a huge difference that could make? Shouldn't we be doing everything possible to reduce our expenses so we can maximize our work in the mission field?)

There's another reason why it's not a good idea for churches to pay pastors, and that's because money is very corrupting. Pastors know that their salary depends on keeping their congregations happy. The congregation voted him into his position, and he knows they can vote him out just as easily if he upsets them. That means his job depends on not stirring things up. If he rebukes them or tells them something they don't want to hear, the congregation can easily get rid of him – and that means he won't be able to provide for his family or put food on the table. The moment you start paying your pastor you give him an *enormous* incentive to compromise. There are many pastors who avoid certain passages in the Bible because they know what would happen to them if they ever preached them. There are many pastors who refuse to teach what the Bible actually says because they know they would be fired if they spoke up. Pastors really do avoid teaching certain truths in order to keep their jobs! That's how it works. (Have you ever noticed that when a pastor is preaching through a book of the Bible, he will skip right over the controversial verses and act like they're not there? That isn't an accident. I realize that your church and your pastor may not do

that, but it's *very* common.)

Here's something to think about: what if pastors *weren't* paid? In that case they would be free to preach the truth. If the congregation got angry and voted him out, his livelihood wouldn't be in danger. He could just go find another church. It would be harder to pressure him to compromise because all of that leverage would be gone.

This means paying your church staff actually creates *two* problems: it puts an enormous financial burden on the congregation that in many cases they can't afford, and it puts pressure on the pastor to compromise the truth so he doesn't lose his job. (Are you starting to see the wisdom of meeting in small groups in people's homes? Do you see how many problems that could solve?)

There's actually a third problem as well. Pastors have been taught to look at their job as a career. They go to seminary and learn how to be pastor, and then find a small church somewhere to get started. After they've been there a few years they will find a position at a larger church somewhere else, where they will stay until a better position opens elsewhere. By hopping from church to church they can eventually navigate the system until they land a high-paying position at a really large church. If you play the game long enough you might even be able to get into a leadership position in the denomination itself. Pastors who know how to play their cards right could find themselves living in a large mansion and getting paid a salary that's many times more than what anyone in their congregation makes. Some pastors even get private jets, which are paid for by people in their congregations who do *not* have private jets (or a mansion).

I realize that pastors don't usually come forward and say these things out loud – but their actions speak volumes. Have you never noticed that nearly all pastors move to a different church after a few years? Have you never noticed that pastors usually leave a small church to go to a bigger one, and then move to an even larger one after that? I realize this isn't always the case, but *this is extremely common*. Don't you find it a bit suspicious that

somehow it's "God's will" for pastors to leave a small struggling church and move to a bigger church where they will be paid a larger salary – and then a few years later it will be "God's will" for them to leave that church to go to a church that's even bigger, and which pays them even more?

I have to ask: is it *really* God's will for pastors to change churches every few years? I think the answer is very clearly *no*, because that entire concept has no Biblical support at all. Jesus said that being a shepherd means taking care of your sheep, getting to know your sheep, and watching over your sheep. The person who abandons the sheep in order to enrich his own life is called hireling, and Jesus has nothing good to say about hirelings. In His eyes they aren't shepherds at all. A person who would lay down his life for his sheep is *entirely different* from someone who abandons his sheep the moment a better job becomes available at a larger church!

If churches met in small groups in people's homes then this would become a non-issue. If you're meeting with a few friends in your own house then you become focused on *nurturing them*, not trying to use them as a springboard to find a more lucrative job somewhere else. That's especially true if you're not getting paid in the first place! You also won't be tempted to leave for a bigger church because the congregation is already limited by the capacity of your home.

For that matter, the whole process of acquiring a pastor doesn't make sense in the first place. Wouldn't it be much better to raise up people from within the small group to hold that job? After all, that's exactly how the church obtains deacons and elders! There's no reason for a church to hire someone from the opposite end of the country. It makes far more sense to find someone *within the church* who is qualified and help them grow into the job. If you pay someone to leave their current church and start preaching at your church, do you know what's going to happen? They're eventually going to leave you and go somewhere else. After all, *that's how you got them in the first place!* Besides, it's much easier to have an impact on someone's life if you've

been with them for 20 years and they've stood by you the entire time. Why would you value the input of a pastor who's only there because you're paying them, who left other people to be with you, and who will leave you once someone gives them a better offer? How invested do you think someone like that is going to be in your church – or your life? Is that really what you want?

Church Membership

Let's suppose that you want to spend time with a group of people who are all Christians. Is that what you'll find when you attend a church service? Nope. Church services are open to everyone. Anyone can walk in – even people who aren't saved and who have never heard the gospel before. In fact, churches actually encourage this! They want as many people as possible to attend their services, and they *especially* want the unsaved to come. That's why they're always encouraging their members to invite people who don't know Jesus.

Pastors know that many of the people they are preaching to might not be saved. That's why services usually end with some sort of “altar call”, in which people are asked to come to the front of the church and “give their life to Jesus”. Some pastors like to draw this part of the service out as long as possible. They think if they play enough songs and work hard enough, then maybe they can coax someone into coming down and “getting saved”. This certainly does have an effect. Since you're telling Christians every single service that they need to come forward and get saved, some Christians start to question their salvation. This results in people who have been saved for years coming forward over and over again. Why? Because that's what their pastor is telling them to do. (Are there ever times when someone who is *not* saved comes forward? It is *extremely* rare.)

Pastors are preaching to a large group of people that they don't really know. Some of them might be saved and others are probably not. A few of them might know the Bible pretty well, but most of them probably don't. Since they are preaching to such a large mixed audience, they have to keep their sermons very simple and basic. After all, they can't assume that their congregation knows anything. They can't go into any depth, and there isn't enough time to get into anything that's complicated or advanced. The best they can do is preach simple sermons on basic topics. Once you've been at church for a few years you will probably have heard everything the pastor has to offer. For the

rest of your life, all of his sermons are going to repeat stuff you've heard before. In fact, you may reach a point where if the pastor was sick one day you could get up and say whatever he was going to say, because you've heard it so many times before. You're not going to hear anything new because pastors have to stick to the basics. Going to the Sunday morning service is like attending first grade forever. There are other grades out there, but because of the mixed nature of the congregation you're not going to find them in the service.

Is that how the early church worked? Absolutely not. The New Testament makes it clear that the only people who are allowed to gather with the church were *saved people*. Those who were unsaved were *not allowed to come!* In fact, if a person was living in sin and refused to repent then the Bible says he should be removed from the church entirely and not allowed to attend services anymore, because his sinful behavior might corrupt others:

1 Corinthians 5:7-13: "Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within?

But them that are without God judgeth.
Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person."

When the church gathers together to worship God, no unrepentant people are supposed to be in their midst. The gathering was never supposed to be a mix of Christians, and non-Christians, and people living openly sinful lives, and people who hated God, and people who wandered into the wrong building. It was supposed to be *all dedicated Christians who were walking in God's ways*. Anyone who wasn't a Christian was excluded from the gathering. Anyone who was openly living in sin and refused to repent had to be excluded until they repented.

Did Paul say that we should be *proud* that we have unrepentant sinners in our midst? Absolutely not. In fact, he actually rebuked the church for allowing that:

1 Corinthians 5:1: "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you."

Paul said that anyone within the church who was living a flagrant life of sin should be a cause for *mourning*, and the church should remove this person from their midst. Instead of doing that, though, the Corinthian church actually *boasted* about having a sinful person in their midst! Paul told them that was the wrong thing to do:

1 Corinthians 5:6-7: "Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are

unleavened. . .”

Paul is pointing out that it's very dangerous to have unrepentant people in their midst, because their wickedness will spread to other people. If one person is allowed to get away with sin, then other people will start thinking that maybe sin isn't so bad. They will think that there are no consequences for sin, and they will be tempted to start doing the same thing.

Some people might argue that Paul is just saying they should have their membership privileges revoked but still allowed to attend. The problem with that argument is that the early church had no concept of “church membership”, the way that churches do today. They viewed all Christians as belonging to one church – the church of Jesus Christ. The only question was whether people should be allowed to gather with them in their homes and attend their services. Paul was clear that these gatherings should *only be for Christians*, and no one else. Not only was it bad for people to attend who were living in sin, it was actually dangerous for the entire church!

This approach has a lot of advantages. It means that the pastor wouldn't need to spend time asking people to come forward and be saved because everyone he is preaching to is already saved. It means that Christians wouldn't be told every single week that they needed to accept Christ, because the pastor who was talking to them would know that they had already done that. If people met in small groups in people's homes, the pastor would be able to craft sermons that specifically addressed the people he was talking to. He would finally be able to preach deep and meaningful sermons because he knew what knowledge everyone had and could build upon that knowledge. The pastor wouldn't have to waste time preaching sermons that people had already heard a dozen times before. If we did things the Biblical way there would finally be a gathering place *specifically for Christians*.

How did the New Testament church reach the lost? They went out into the world and found them. They preached the

gospel directly to the lost, and in their gathering places. They *went out to them*. They searched for them and found them instead of sitting back and hoping the lost would wander into their church buildings! That is a much better system for everyone.

How did Christians in the New Testament become a member of the church? They did it by repenting of their sins and believing in Jesus. That's quite different from the way it's done today! The modern church believes that the church is *the building*, and in order to become a member in good standing with that building you have to go through a rite of passage. That process may involve a class or something else, but you can only become part of the church once you've passed through this rite. However, *there's nothing Biblical about that at all*. The Bible is clear that once you're saved you are part of the church, *period*. It's true that the Bible commands Christians to distance themselves from people who claim to be believers but who are living in open sin, but the Bible *never* calls any building “the church” and it never says anything about what we call “church membership”. (There's also the fact that church membership is pretty useless. You can attend services for years without ever being a member. A lack of membership doesn't stop you from attending any classes or services that the church has to offer, and it doesn't stop you from taking communion either. The only thing it actually does is stop you from holding a church office – and, honestly, the only offices that are usually available to people are working in the nursery and being an usher. If you're not interested in doing either of those things then there's no real reason to ever join. It's true that it stops you from voting on things, but we'll get into voting a bit later in this series.)

The very language that we use demonstrates how unbiblical our views of the church really are. If we truly believed that the church was *the people* then we would never call a building “the church”, and we would never call the process of giving people voting privileges “church membership”.

Is it a good idea for churches to make sure that people who want to start fellowshipping with them really are Christians?

Absolutely. But somehow people forget that *there is only one church*, and that is the church that Christ founded by dying for our sins and rising on the third day. We become a member of that church when we repent of our sins and believe on Him.

Modern Christians have vastly overcomplicated “going to church”. The truth is that you “go to church” when you meet with other Christians, because *Christians are the church*. From a Biblical standpoint, “going to church” has nothing to do with going to a specific building! This is what Jesus said about it:

Matthew 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

If two or three people are gathered together in the name of Jesus, then Jesus is with those people. They have “gone to church”, even if they didn't drive across town and walk into a building.

Is it important for Christians to gather together in the name of Jesus? Absolutely. In fact, it is commanded:

Hebrews 10:23-25: “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

Are we supposed to assemble ourselves together in the name of Jesus? Absolutely! Does this verse say that we need a dedicated building in order to do that, and it only counts if we gather into that building? Nope. In fact, buildings aren't even mentioned! What *is* mentioned is the need to exhort one another. The verse has nothing to say about having a multi-million-dollar

facility with a restaurant and a library and a basketball court, but it does say we need to provoke one another to good works.

Here's a question for you: if you attend a Sunday morning service, can you provoke anyone to good works? Nope. Your job in the service is to sit there quietly along with everyone else, and then go home. Can you exhort anyone? Nope. Only the pastor is allowed to speak; everyone else must be silent. It may be true that *technically* a group of Christians have indeed gathered together into the same room, but that group has not been “assembled” in any meaningful way. The New Testament pictures the church as a dynamic body that's composed of many different parts, and each person has something valuable to contribute that the church needs. The modern church, however, is run by the paid staff, who (along with the deacons and elders) do everything while the congregation sits there passively and does nothing. Do you really think that's what the author of Hebrews had in mind when he told us to assemble ourselves together? Do you think he was hoping that we would gather together in a room, sit quietly for 90 minutes, and then go home without interacting with anyone else?

I realize it's possible to form relationships with other people who attend church. *But that must be done outside of the service.* It's possible to ask questions and get help and make prayer requests, *but that must be done outside of the service.* The reason people gather together on Sunday mornings is to attend that service, *but the service provides no opportunities for people to do anything!* If you want to provoke one another to good works and exhort one another, *which are some of the key reasons why we should assemble in the first place,* you have to do that outside of the service. Do you see the problem?

As if that wasn't bad enough, most people *only go to the Sunday morning service.* I realize that once a month the church might allow people to gather together and share a meal (which is a far cry from the early church, which ate together *daily*). There may also be the occasional church function. But the Sunday morning service is the primary way that the congregation interacts with each other, and it's specifically designed to *keep the*

congregation from interacting with each other. (Allowing people sixty seconds during the service to turn to their neighbors and say “Hi” doesn't count as a meaningful interaction.)

Voting

It's really amazing how much of a gap there is between the way the Bible says the church should be run, and the way the church is actually run. For example, nearly everything in the modern church is decided by voting. Deacons are voted in. Elders are voted in. Pastors are voted in. Major decisions are voted in. Churches hold business meetings to vote on church expansion, or new church policies, or even solving plumbing problems. The local church is run by the congregation, and they make their will known by the process of voting.

This has some very important consequences. Since churches can vote pastors in, they can also vote them out. This means the pastor knows his job depends on keeping the congregation happy. He knows that if he tells them things they don't want to hear, or he rebukes them for a sin that's common in their midst, they might get angry with him and vote him out. If the pastor wants to keep his job then he'll have to please the congregation. That puts a lot of pressure on him to avoid talking about hard doctrines and unpleasant truths. This is why it's very rare for pastors to call out a church for the sin in their midst that needs to be dealt with, or to address the big issues that have been crippling the church. His job depends on keeping people happy, so that's what he is going to do. If the church happens to find a pastor that isn't willing to compromise what the Bible teaches, they will usually get rid of him in short order and replace him with someone else. That means churches will usually be run by pastors who aren't going to challenge them, or correct them, or rebuke them.

Is that good for the church? Definitely not. Do you know what would happen if children had the power to veto their parents, and could always get their way and reject all instruction? They would grow up to be uncontrollable, spoiled brats. I think that's exactly why so many churches are spiritually dead. The Bible puts it this way:

2 Timothy 4:2-3: “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.”

Paul warned of a time when Christians would hate sound doctrine and would get rid of sound teachers so they could listen to lies that they found more enjoyable than the truth. That's exactly the situation we are in today! Why would people listen to someone who was going to rebuke them for their sin when they could vote him out and replace him with a pastor who would tell them what they wanted to hear? That is exactly what's going to happen if the sheep are given the ability to vote out their shepherd. It's inevitable.

Is that how the Bible says that churches should be organized? Does the Bible say that congregations should vote for their pastors? Actually, no. You won't find that teaching anywhere in the Bible. In fact, no church anywhere in the New Testament ever made *any* decision by voting! Now, that is *not* because people in ancient times didn't understand the concept of voting. Ancient Greece predated the New Testament by centuries, and it was a democracy. By the time the New Testament was written the concept of voting was hundreds of years old.

Do you know how people in the Bible *did* make decisions? They cast lots (which means, essentially, they flipped a coin). That's how the disciples chose the replacement for the traitor Judas:

Acts 1:23-26: “And they appointed two, Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew

whether of these two thou hast chosen, That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place. And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.”

If the modern church wanted to choose an apostle today and had two equally qualified candidates to choose from, it would never consider casting lots! Instead they would put it to a vote, and the most popular person would win. In the Bible, though, *no church ever does that*. Why? Because it's a bad idea. It's much wiser to cast lots:

Proverbs 18:18: “The lot causeth contentions to cease, and parteth between the mighty.”

Why does casting lots cause contentions to cease? Because everyone understands that it's fair. No one can accuse anyone of partiality or underhanded dealing. On top of that, the Bible says that God governs the outcome of casting lots:

Proverbs 16:33: “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.”

This doesn't mean that people in ancient times had some special mystical dice that they used to make decisions. The verse is saying that God controls everything – including the outcome of casting lots. When the disciples replaced Judas, they looked for candidates that matched the Biblical qualifications and found two who were equally qualified. Since either of them would work, they prayed that God would show them His will and then cast lots, trusting that the outcome of the lots would be the will of God. Why did they put that much faith in casting lots? Because of Proverbs 16:33. Do you see how different their thinking was from ours?

Notice that they didn't tell everyone to go home and pray, and then waited for someone to step forward and say "God spoke to me and told me that we should do X." After all, how could you ever prove that God really *did* speak to that person? Instead they cast lots, which settled the matter.

The point I'm trying to make is that what the Bible teaches is *completely different* from the way we do things in our churches. There's no Biblical support for church buildings, and no apostle ever suggested we needed them or should have them. There's no Biblical support for a church service that consists of the congregation being told exactly what to sing and what to pray, and then being preached at in silence for 30 minutes before being sent home. We may think that it makes sense for the congregation to sit passively and contribute nothing to the service while the paid staff does everything, but you won't find that model anywhere in the Bible. We may think it's natural to have 5000 people attend a single church service, which is held by a pastor who doesn't know the people who are attending his own church, but you won't find that in the Bible. We may think it makes sense for people who are in trouble to file a form and make an appointment and then pay for counseling services, but that's not how Jesus said churches should handle their lost sheep. The truth is no New Testament church was ever operated the way that modern churches operate!

Did the early church vote on who should be pastors and elders and deacons? No. Did they have business meetings? No. Instead the Bible established a series of qualifications that must be met in order to take on certain roles within the church. People who didn't meet those qualifications were excluded from the position, and there was no restriction on how many pastors or deacons or elders there could be in a church. (The Bible never says there should be a "head pastor" or a "youth pastor". Those positions have been made up and have no Biblical support.) If for some reason there *was* a limit and you had more qualified people than you had open positions, then you could cast lots. No voting was needed.

What do you do if someone is living in open sin? You remove them from the congregation. What do you do if the pastor is wicked? In that case he is living in open sin, so he would be removed – without any need to vote him out. What do you do if the pastor is preaching heresy and false teaching? That would also be open sin, so he would be removed without any need to vote him out. What do you do if the pastor is not very good? You train him – and there's no reason why you can't have more than one pastor (especially if you aren't paying them a salary). What do you do if the pastor preaches something that's true but the congregation doesn't want to hear it? *You keep him*. If your church is organized along Biblical lines then there isn't a need to vote on anything. (You're not going to be voting on new air conditioners for the building if you don't have a building in the first place!) If your congregation finds a need to vote on things then there's probably something wrong with the way your local church is organized.

Non-Profit Churches

In this country churches are organized as non-profit corporations. (That's right: from a legal standpoint *they are a business.*) The advantage to this is that all contributions made to these churches are tax deductible. The disadvantage is that in order to maintain their non-profit status they have to abide by certain rules, and one of those rules is that they can't be political.

You may not realize this, but before modern times it was very common for churches to preach on political topics. This is because pastors understood that the Bible governs *all* aspects of life, including the government. The Bible really does have something to say about healthcare, and the economy, and laws, and regulations. It really does talk about how society should work, and what laws should exist, and what justice looks like. Pastors used to preach sermons on the government all the time. In fact, during the colonial era they even preached about the constitution that had been proposed by the founding fathers. They wanted to analyze it from a Biblical standpoint and see if it measured up to the standard defined in the Word of God.

Today churches avoid politics altogether. In fact, churches actually take great pride in having nothing to say about politics and not taking any stance on any political issue. However, *this is not an improvement!* Since pastors avoid the subject altogether, congregations often have no idea how to look at the government from a Biblical standpoint. They don't know how to think about a law from a Biblical standpoint. People have been taught that politics has nothing to do with Christianity, so when people think about political subjects they keep the Bible far away from their thinking. *This is very bad.*

Does God have anything to say about what's right and wrong? Of course. Does God define justice? Yes He does. Does God have anything to say to kings, or nations, or governments? Absolutely! Does the Bible tell us how nations should treat each other? Yes it does. Can the Bible teach us the difference between a just law and an unjust one? Yes, it can. Are pastors going to

bring any of this up? Absolutely not.

The truth is that Christianity applies to *all of life*. It's not something that we should just do on Sunday mornings and then put on the shelf for the rest of the week! Christianity should impact how we think about *all of our life* – including the way that the government operates. Pastors should teach people how to have a Biblical worldview, and that worldview should apply to *everything*. Instead of doing that, though, pastors ignore politics and pretend that God has no interest in the subject at all.

One reason they do that is because there are a lot of different views in a given congregation, and if they took a stand on something it might make people angry. (This goes back to the fact that churches are attended by saved people and lost people and people who claim to be saved but who are living in sin. If congregations removed the unrepentant sinners from their midst, which is what the Bible commands, then this wouldn't be a problem. Do you see how many problems we could fix if we did things God's way?) If pastors make their congregations angry then that could cost them their jobs. (Do you see how much trouble is caused by voting?) Since churches pay the pastor's salary that would impact their ability to feed their families. (Do you see how much trouble is caused when pastors depend on churches for money?) The other reason is that if a church starts preaching on politics then it might lose its tax-exempt status, and that could have a big impact on the amount of money it receives (and the money they have to pay in taxes). Churches need a lot of money in order to pay for their large building and their large staff. (Do you see how much trouble is caused by having church buildings?) In the end churches need money, and to get that money they're willing to make whatever compromises are necessary.

Do you think God is honored when churches refuse to teach what the Bible has to say in order to get more money? I very seriously doubt it. I can't imagine a pastor standing before God and hearing Him say “I'm so glad you sold out the Bible in order to keep your tax-exempt status! That was definitely the right call. It's important to throw out whatever doctrines you need to in

order to keep that money flowing.” Yet that is *exactly* what churches do. Pastors know there would be serious consequences if they taught the full counsel of God, so they don't teach it. (How do we know that they don't teach it? Well, ask yourself this: how many political sermons have you heard in your life? If you've been attending the typical Protestant church, the answer is *zero*. So clearly they're avoiding the subject.) Churches know they might get in financial trouble if they taught how the Bible applies to politics and the government, so they don't go there. They avoid the subject entirely.

Would this be a problem in a small home church? Nope. That church wouldn't need a budget to operate, so it would be fine. Its pastor would already be working a full-time job to pay his salary, so his livelihood wouldn't be in danger. The money that the church received could go directly to outreach and mission work. It's true that people wouldn't be able to claim their offerings as a tax deduction, but I think God would rather have a faithful church than a rich one. How do we know that? Because that's exactly what Jesus Himself said to the church of Laodicea:

Revelation 3:17-19: “Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.”

That congregation was convinced that God approved of them because they were rich and prosperous. Was God impressed? Absolutely not! God saw that their spiritual condition was appalling and wretched, so He rebuked them and commanded

them to repent. They may have had money, but they didn't have the things that really mattered. They weren't faithful in the sight of God. They weren't zealous for the truth or passionate about preaching the full counsel of God. In fact, verse 15 tells us they actually didn't care about the truth at all. They were indifferent – so God told them they made Him want to vomit.

If the government ever comes to a church and says “I will give you money as long as you avoid certain subjects”, the answer of the church should *always* be a firm “No”. It doesn't matter how small or harmless the compromise may seem. God requires us to preach and teach *everything!* This is how Jesus put it:

Matthew 4:4: “But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.”

There are no doctrines we are allowed to disavow in order to win the approval of others. God is never going to tell you “I'm so glad you sold out the truth in exchange for money. That was the right call.” Do you honestly believe that the nation is better off when Christians have no idea how to apply Biblical principles to the operation of the government? That seems pretty unlikely to me!

I'm not saying that churches should endorse political parties or specific candidates. What I *am* saying is that pastors ought to teach people how to think Biblically about *all* of life. Excluding politics from the discussion is very wrong.

Family Worship

When it comes to church services, the modern church is eager to separate families from their children as much as possible. Churches that have Sunday School have special classes just for children (which are strictly divided by age). At the beginning of the Sunday morning service, children are dismissed to go attend a separate service that doesn't include their parents. Churches often hold events that are specifically targeted at children (once again, divided by age groups). They even have a youth pastor whose entire job is to minister to children.

Is any of this Biblical? Nope. You won't find any youth ministers in the New Testament. You also won't find any churches that sent children to a separate service so they could worship away from their parents. No apostle ever suggested that people should be divided up into groups based on their age, or that it was best for children to not worship alongside their parents. That's not how things were done in the New Testament!

You know what we *do* find? We find that children actually stayed right beside their parents. When Joshua read the Mosaic Law to the nation, the children weren't separated from their parents and sent to children's church:

Joshua 8:34-35: “And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessings and cursings, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not before all the congregation of Israel, with the women, and the little ones, and the strangers that were conversant among them.”

How much of the Law did Joshua read to the people – including to the children who were present? Every single word. Did he leave anything out? No. Did he leave the curses out? No. Did he leave the unpleasant parts out? No. Did he send the

children off so that the adults could talk? No. The family stayed together.

Are there any passages in the Bible that suggest children would be better off if they were taken away from their parents and taught separately? No. Do you know who God has put in charge of teaching children? Their parents. God wants *their parents* to teach them His Law:

Deuteronomy 6:6-9: “And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.”

Who can teach children when they are sitting at the house, and lying down to sleep, and rising up? The parents. Does God ever suggest that parents should outsource that responsibility to pastors? Absolutely not. Parents need to take responsibility for their children and raise them up in the Lord. Parents should teach their children about God, and children should worship God alongside their parents.

But what about the topics that aren't necessarily appropriate for children? Here's the thing: those topics are almost *never* mentioned in churches. It's extremely rare for anything to come up that might be inappropriate for children – especially since Joshua didn't have any qualms about reading the entire Mosaic Law to little children! If there's a need to talk about something that might not be wise to share with children then it makes sense to remove them for that specific conversation, but that is a very rare case. Children should be with their parents as

much as possible.

In a small group setting this makes a lot of sense, because you're talking about a group of maybe 15 people that's meeting in a home. The services that we find in the New Testament are interactive. People talk to one another, they expound on the Word of God, they share a meal, and they contribute to each other's lives. In a service like that children could learn from others and from their parents because the family unit isn't a passive participant anymore! How do you grow wise? By spending time with wise people – *not* by spending time with people who happen to be the same age that you are.

I'm not saying it's bad for children to have friends that are their own age. What I am saying is that it makes no sense to send children away when it's time for the Sunday morning service. You aren't showing up at church in order to be entertained, and you don't need age-appropriate entertainment for your children. There are simply no Biblical grounds for diving a church service into groups based on age. How can the young possibly learn from the life experiences of the elderly if they're kept in separate classes?

Marriage

The procedure for getting married in our society is pretty well understood. First you have to go and get a marriage license, and then you have to find someone to perform the marriage. When it comes to performing the marriage ceremony people typically have two options: they can go down to the courthouse and get married by a justice of the peace, or they can find a pastor and have him do the job. This procedure is so commonplace that people don't even think twice about it. If you ask someone "Who married you?" they will typically give you the name of their pastor – because people believe that pastors have the ability to take two people and join them together in marriage.

But do they *really* have that ability? Stop and think about it. What gives pastors the ability to join people in holy matrimony? Who gave them that power? I'm being serious here. Where did this ability come from?

You can check the Bible, but you won't find it there. The Bible gives pastors many responsibilities: they are to preach the gospel, take care of their flocks, baptize people, and so forth, but the Bible *never* gives them the power to marry people. It's never even *mentioned!* Jesus Christ charged the church with going into all the world, making disciples, and baptizing people, but He *never* mentioned the idea that His church should be marrying people. He didn't even hint at it.

The apostles wrote a lot of letters to various churches and told them how to follow the Lord, but they never mentioned the idea that churches should be involved with marrying people. They talked about feeding the poor, healing the sick, making converts, and even church discipline, but they never mentioned churches holding marriage ceremonies – *not a single time*.

In fact, no church in the entire Bible ever performed a marriage! No disciple, apostle, or deacon ever performed a wedding in the Bible. There are no cases where a pastor took two people and married them. *It never happened.*

What I'm trying to say is this: the idea that pastors have

the ability to unite two people in marriage *doesn't come from the Bible*. There's absolutely nothing in the Bible that says pastors can do that, and there's nothing that says churches ought to be involved in performing marriages. *It's not there*. I understand that churches have decided to take that role upon themselves, but God didn't give them that responsibility.

That means pastors *do not* have the power to unite people in marriage. Pastors have no more power to marry people than insurance agents or electricians. I understand that people believe they need to find pastor in order to get married, but there's no Biblical basis for that. It may be traditional, but it's man's tradition – not God's.

So who *does* have the power to marry people? Well, according to Jesus Christ, only one person can do that:

Matthew 19:4-6: “And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore **God hath joined together**, let not man put asunder.”

Who has the power to take two people and joins them together in marriage? *God does*. Only the Lord has that power! No mortal being can unite people in marriage because God is the one who does the joining. How does it work? Well, it's pretty simple. Jesus said that a man leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife, and God unites them into one. That's literally what the verse says. At that point they have been joined together. They are no longer two people; instead they are one flesh.

Here's what that means in practical terms. In the marriage ceremony, the marriage license itself means nothing. Regardless of whether or not it's required from a legal standpoint (which is a

complex topic far beyond the scope of this discussion), that piece of paper carries no weight with God. Having a marriage license is *not* what makes you married, and *not* having one doesn't mean you *aren't* married. After all, Adam and Eve didn't have a marriage license but the Bible tells us they were husband and wife. There are many societies that never had marriage licenses or pastors to marry people, but that doesn't mean those societies didn't have marriage. To God a marriage license is just a meaningless piece of paper. It carries no weight with Him and has no authority.

Likewise, at the end of the ceremony, when the pastor says “I now pronounce you man and wife”, his pronouncement means nothing. Saying those words does *not* make the couple married, and *not* saying those words doesn't leave them unmarried. What the pastor says is *utterly irrelevant!* The truth is *he should not be involved in this anyway*. God never told him to marry people, nor did the Lord give him permission to do that!

What unites people in marriage is when, as Jesus said in Matthew 19, the man takes the woman to be his wife, and the wife takes the man to be her husband, and the two make a lifelong covenant together in the sight of God. When the couple exchanges their vows and commits to being husband and wife, at that point they're married because *God* joins them together. You don't need a pastor to get married, and you don't need official recognition from the government. Marriages that don't involve pastors, churches, or governments are not somehow “fake”. God never says you need a pastor or a license in order to have a binding marriage. The traditions of men aren't the same thing as the commandments of God! We should be looking to *the Bible* to see how marriage works.

Does the marriage become official when it's consummated? Nope. That's *not* what makes two people a married couple! We know this because Adam and Eve were referred to as husband and wife long before they consummated their union. Take a look for yourself. This is Genesis 2:25:

Genesis 2:25: “And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.”

Eve is referred to as Adam's wife *immediately*, as soon as she was created and given to Adam. However, their relationship wasn't consummated until much later – after they sinned and were kicked out of the garden of Eden:

Genesis 4:1: “And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the Lord.”

If that's not enough evidence for you, here's something else to consider. God has always been very clear that sex is only permissible *within* marriage. Sex within marriage is good, but sex outside of marriage is a serious sin. This means you have to *already be married* before you can have sex. Therefore the marriage must take place *first* – which means that the act of the physical union *cannot* be part of the marriage process!

Adam and Eve are a great example of how marriage works. God brought Eve to Adam, Adam accepted her as his wife, and they became a married couple. This is despite the fact there was no marriage license, and there was no pastor to pronounce them married. (I would like to add that witnesses are a very good idea because they will provide evidence that the marriage happened, and will hold the couple to the fact that they truly are married). All it took to marry them was their covenant to each other, which was made in the sight of God. That was enough.

The reason this matters is because we've come to believe that people are united in marriage *by other people*, instead of by God. This leads to the idea that since the marriage was *created* by other people, it can also be dissolved by other people. Since the government grants the marriage, the government can grant the divorce.

But as we've seen, the government has absolutely *nothing to do* with uniting people in marriage! Likewise, pastors are *not*

part of the process (no matter what they claim). God is the one who unites people in marriage, which means only God can dissolve the marriage. You can go down to the courthouse and get a divorce, but all the government can give you is a piece of paper that carries no weight in the sight of God. The courthouse isn't the one who married you in the first place; God was the one who did that. This means *God has to grant your divorce*. If He doesn't then *you don't have one*; in His sight you are still married to your original spouse.

Divorce is a very complex subject, and I don't have the time to cover it in detail here. There are definitely valid reasons to get a divorce, and in some cases it is absolutely the right thing to do and God definitely recognizes the divorce. The point I want to make is that God is the one who united you in marriage in the first place (not your pastor or the government), and only God can separate you. If you divorce your spouse for an unbiblical reason (which is too complicated a subject to get into here), then God doesn't recognize your divorce *and still considers you to be married to your original spouse*. Just because you consider yourself to be divorced does *not* necessarily mean that God agrees with you. If you didn't get divorced for a Biblical reason (for example, if you left your faithful wife and children in order to move in with another, younger woman who you thought was hotter) then God considers you to be having an affair and living in sin with someone you are *not* married to. That may seem like a technical detail, but we must remember that when it comes time for us to die we will stand before God and be held accountable for the things we have done. Our actions really do have consequences.

Altar Calls

Are altar calls Biblical? Now, I realize this might seem like a strange question to ask. After all, altar calls have become a staple of the modern church, to the point where it's hard to imagine a Sunday morning service that *doesn't* have an altar call. Who could possibly object to ending a sermon with an invitation to come forward and be saved? Isn't that just the natural thing to do?

Altar calls have become a tradition – in fact, they have almost become a sacrament in our churches. Because of this we don't stop to think about what we're actually doing. We simply accept them and assume that altar calls must be a good idea – but I think it's time we took a Biblical look at what we're doing. We should always be willing to compare every aspect of our churches to what's revealed in the Word of God. There should be nothing that's “too important” to examine from a Biblical perspective. If altar calls are a solid Biblical practice then it should be a simple matter to demonstrate that from the Bible, right? But if the Bible *doesn't* support this practice then that should tell us something.

The first point I'd like to make is that there are no altar calls anywhere in the Bible. Altar calls are completely unknown in the Old Testament. In the New Testament no church is ever said to have used one, and they aren't mentioned in any of the letters to the churches. The disciples never used an altar call in any of their sermons, and even Jesus Himself never used altar calls.

Some people try very hard to find an altar call in the Bible, but it can't be done because *there aren't any*. People are so desperate to find an example of this practice that they claim Melchizedek's meeting with Abraham was an altar call:

Genesis 14:18: “And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God.

19 And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be

Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth:

20 And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all."

Just take a look at that passage for yourself! Does Melchizedek ask his audience to come to the front of the church and pray the sinner's prayer so they can be saved from their sins? Absolutely not. This isn't even *remotely* an altar call! No one is urging sinners to repent of their sins and put their faith and trust in Christ – and yet people still claim that this is Biblical proof that altar calls are Scriptural. A simple reading of the passage demonstrates that this simply isn't true.

There are no altar calls anywhere in the Bible! It's not a Biblical practice, and there's no Scriptural support for that idea. Now, that doesn't mean that no one in the Bible preached the gospel, because they most certainly did. Many people preached repentance and urged sinners to turn away from their sins:

Matthew 3:1-2: "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Matthew 4:17: "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Acts 2:38: "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

There are many more examples that I could give, but I think you get the point. There's no shortage of preaching in the

Bible! What we *don't* find are altar calls. Even when Jesus ministered to thousands of people for several days in a row, He never wrapped up by urging people to come to the front of the group to be saved. That simply never happened.

In our days that would be unthinkable, wouldn't it? If a modern church had a group of thousands of people, they would conclude the service by playing some sort of emotional hymn. The pastor would ask everyone to close their eyes, and urge the people to pray a certain prayer. The pastor would then say that if they prayed that prayer then they're saved. (Instead of praying that prayer in their seats while no one is looking, some pastors invite people to come to the front of the church to pray that prayer.) This practice is so common that it doesn't usually cross our minds that no one in the Bible ever did anything like this.

But the truth is the altar call is a modern phenomenon. It's entirely absent from the Bible, and the early church didn't practice it. The altar call was popularized by Charles Finney, who lived from 1792 to 1875. There were a few isolated cases where altar calls were used before then in some special circumstances, but Finney is the person who popularized it. That means *altar calls were unknown to the church before the 19th century*. They are something new! I'd also like to point out that while Finney was a well-known evangelist, he was far from orthodox. Finney rejected the doctrine of original sin and he didn't believe in the imputed righteousness of Christ (which is the doctrine that when we're saved God gives us the perfect righteousness of Christ, and that's why we are justified in His sight). He also rejected the idea of Biblical regeneration – that people are made new creatures in Christ after they're saved.

Finney believed that in order to save people, all you had to do was put the right kind of emotional pressure on them and use the right kind of tricks, and you could drive them to the altar and get them to say that magical prayer. He also believed in the “prayer of faith”, which to him meant that God was required to give you anything you prayed for. If you prayed that 100 souls would be saved by your preaching, then God was required to save

100 souls no matter what. (Needless to say, there are very serious theological problems with that idea.)

This was the mindset of the person who created the altar call, and this was the theology behind it. People today have accepted Finney's ideas regarding what it takes to get people saved – and that's unfortunate, because what the Bible teaches about salvation is radically different. The modern approach to salvation is extremely shallow and produces many false converts. The church isn't doing a very good job of explaining to people what salvation actually requires.

For example, take this account:

I recall a conversation in America in which a pastor's wife narrated to me her experience as a counselor. In counseling someone who came forward [to the altar] she discovered that this enquirer had no concept of repentance or faith. She endeavored therefore to explain the gospel in a simple manner. The leader of the meeting in the meantime began to be impatient and after about ten minutes could stand it no longer. Sweeping the woman counselor aside, he took over as follows:

“You don't want to go to hell, do you?”

“No!”

“You want to go to heaven, don't you?”

“Yes, I do!”

“You believe that Christ died for sinners, don't you?”

“Yes, I do!”

“Then let's give thanks that he died for you and has given you salvation.”

Then the leader prayed as follows: “Lord, I thank you for giving this soul eternal life. Thank you, Lord, Amen.”

Then, turning to the person in question,

he said, "Now you have eternal life and you can praise the Lord! Go and tell your friends that you have been saved!"

(*The Great Invitation*, Hulse, p109)

Was that person actually saved? I very seriously doubt it. He had no idea what faith was and he had no concept of repentance. On top of that, the prayer itself was prayed by *the leader*, not by the individual! The person never repented of his sins or gave his life to Jesus. I'd like to point out that even *demons* believe that Christ died for sinners, and demons would much rather go to Heaven than be cast into Hell! Demons, though, *are not saved*.

You see, being saved isn't just a matter of believing that Christ died for sinners. You also have to *repent*. You must go to Jesus and ask Him to forgive your sins. You must submit yourself to Christ, which means turning away from your sins and walking in God's ways. Salvation is far more than just a mental assertion of "Yes, Jesus died for sins"! In order to be saved you must *surrender to God*. You must stop your rebellion against God and give Him complete control over your life, your will, your thoughts, your possessions, and your actions.

You also need to understand who Christ is and what He did. For example:

Romans 10:9: "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."

Notice that belief in the resurrection is part of the requirements for salvation! The verse also says that you *must* make Jesus your Lord. You *cannot* be saved by saying "Yes, Lord, I believe that you died for sinners and I want to go to Heaven, but I'm not going to obey you and I don't want you to tell me what to do. Just mind your own business and do whatever I tell you, and

we'll get along fine.” That is *not* salvation!

During altar calls churches tell people that if they come forward and pray a prayer, they will be saved – but that is not a true statement. *It's not the prayer that saves you!* The prayer of salvation is not a magical spell that saves people by the mere act of repeating the words. It takes more than that! Does the sinner actually understand the gospel? Are they repenting of their sins? Do they actually believe in the person and work of Christ? Are they abandoning their rebellion against God and submitting themselves to His authority? The answer to these questions is *extremely important*. The only thing that can save people is *faith in Christ*. If that is absent then the prayer won't do any good. We are saved by *faith*:

Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Notice that this passage *doesn't* say “You are saved by praying the sinner's prayer, regardless of what you believe or whether you've actually repented!” *But that is precisely how people treat the sinner's prayer.*

The great danger of altar calls is that they are extremely shallow. They don't get into any of these core issues about salvation. Instead they teach people that if they just say certain magical words then they can escape Hell. So what do people do? They come to the front of the church, they recite that prayer, and they go away believing they're saved. Doesn't that seem like a dangerous thing to be doing?

The church then makes things even worse by pronouncing that person to be saved right there on the spot. That is a terrible thing to do! How can you possibly know in that moment if that person was actually saved? Nowhere does the Bible say “If you go to the front of the church, recite a prayer, and feel good about yourself afterward, you are saved” – but that's how *countless*

people verify their salvation. The Biblical way of making sure that you're saved is to examine your life for the fruits of the Holy Spirit. The book of 1 John has a whole list of tests that you can use to examine your life for evidence that you really have changed and you truly have become a new person. Do you love other Christians? Do you obey God? Have you confessed your sins? Are you growing in holiness? Have you abandoned your old wicked ways? Are you remaining in the faith?

The only way to tell if a person has been saved is to wait and see, and evaluate their lives against the objective criteria that the Bible has given us. The proof of their salvation can be found in the life that they lead. As Jesus said, a good tree bears good fruit and a bad tree bears bad fruit. Genuine conversions always result in a changed life, because we become a new creature in Christ:

2 Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

If there is no change in that person's life and they continue living sin and depravity then they aren't a Christian. The prayer that they prayed was a waste of time, and responding to the altar call did nothing. Their conversion was phony. But you know something? *That's not something you can determine during the altar call!* Churches have absolutely no business pronouncing anyone saved on the spot.

If the prayer “didn't work”, the problem isn't with Christ. Jesus is clear that He will reject no one:

John 6:37: “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.”

The problem is with what churches are doing. It's true that

if you put a lot of emotional pressure on people and use the right manipulative tactics, you might be able to get people to come to the front of the church and recite a prayer that you've told them to pray. *But that's very different from getting saved!* Reciting that prayer doesn't mean that the person understood or believed the gospel. It doesn't mean have any idea what Christ actually did for them on the cross. It doesn't mean they're sorry for their sins or are willing to turn away from them. It *especially* doesn't mean that the person is laying down their life and pledging to submit themselves to Christ.

It's that last point which is especially relevant in our modern age. Churches are filled with people who believe that Christ died for sinners, but who have absolutely no intention of obeying God. These people love their sins and don't have the slightest intention of turning away from them. They believe that they can continue to live a life of open sin, and God will have to take whatever He can get. The idea that you must repent of your sins and live a holy life is completely foreign to them. They would never agree to such a thing because they love their sins too much.

These people *are not saved*. The apostle John makes this point very clear:

I John 2:3-5: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.”

The modern church may call these people “carnal Christians” and say that they're just not very spiritual, but the Bible calls them what they are: *lost people*. In order to be saved you must accept Jesus as your Savior *and* your Lord. If you reject Him as Lord and insist that *you* will control your life, then you

aren't saved at all.

But altar calls gloss over all these critically important issues. They don't give people a deep understanding of the gospel; instead they say “Pray this prayer and you'll go to Heaven”. They don't test the person to see if he actually understands what he's doing or believes in the gospel; instead they use high-pressure tactics to get people to say a set of magical words. On top of all that, altar calls assure the person that they're saved right then and there – instead of applying the Biblical tests that separate true conversions from false ones. As a result, our churches are filled with people who may not understand the gospel at all, and who may not have actually repented, but who are nonetheless convinced that they're saved because they once went to the front and recited a prayer. That is a very bad situation!

Here's something to think about: of all those people who come to the altar to “get saved”, how many of them show any fruits of repentance?

Matthew 3:7-8: “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:”

When ten thousand people respond in one of the great evangelistic crusades, do we see the lives of those people transformed? How many of those people lead holy lives and display the fruits of the Spirit? You know the answer as well as I do: most of those people are never seen again. They go right back to their sinful lives.

There are some people in churches who come to the altar to “get saved” over, and over, and over again. The reason they do this is because they don't understand the gospel and they have no idea how to tell if they're actually saved or not. They think that being saved is some kind of warm feeling, and since they don't

have that feeling anymore they must not be saved. So they go to the front of the church to try to get that feeling again, and then announce to the world that this time they've *really* been saved. That entire line of thinking is completely unbiblical, but that's the sort of mindset the church has been encouraging. The church has exchanged the Biblical understanding of the gospel for a shallow one that's designed to drive as many people as possible to the front of the church.

It may seem completely harmless to urge people to come to the front of the church to be saved – but is it? The church has taught generations of people that coming to the front of the church and reciting a prayer is the same thing as getting saved. That is completely different from what the Bible has to say about the matter! In fact, I'm very concerned that we're actually inoculating people from the gospel. After all, once a person has gone to the front of the church and recited that prayer, they believe they're saved *because that's what pastors tell them*. Even if they're leading an incredibly wicked life that's utterly devoid of faith or godliness, it's impossible to tell that person “You need to repent and believe”. Since they believe they're already saved, they won't listen to anything you have to say. They have been taught a false standard of faith, and that blocks the Biblical standard from ever reaching them.

Now, if a person is feeling conviction for their sins and wants to talk to the pastor about it, I think that's a good thing. A thorough conversation could do that person a lot of good and lead them to Christ – but that's not what altar calls are. I fear that our approach to salvation has *not* been saving people at all, but instead has been immunizing them against the gospel and setting them on the road to Hell. Are there people who have been saved through altar calls? Of course – but the number of people who respond and then are never seen again is far, *far* greater. Should we really be using a method that rarely works, that produces many false converts, and which has no Biblical support whatsoever? I don't think so.

You might wonder: if altar calls are not Biblical then what

should churches be doing? It's an easy question to answer. We should preach the gospel:

I Corinthians 1:18-24: “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.”

Notice that Paul didn't say “If you want to get people saved, play a soft hymn and urge them to come to the front of the church to recite the following prayer. If people don't want to come forward then plant a few people in the audience and have them come to the front, to make it look like people are responding and put more emotional pressure on the reluctant ones. Tell people that all they have to do to get saved is recite a certain phrase. Avoid talking about the cost of following Christ, and make no mention of repentance or a changed life. Keep it simple: people just need to come to the front of the church and pray a prayer, and then they're done.” Even though churches follow those instructions as if they were a sacrament from God, you will not find them *anywhere* in the Bible. Instead Paul was simple and to the point: *preach the cross*. Preach the full gospel of God, because

that's the mechanism God will use to save people.

I find it fascinating that Christ routinely offended those who came to Him. For example, after attracting a very large crowd by miraculously feeding thousands of people with a very small meal, Jesus said this:

John 6:51-53: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.”

After Jesus preached that message, many of those who had been following Him left:

John 6:64-66: “But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him. And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father. From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.”

If the modern church had been in that situation it would have reacted very differently. First of all, the church would have had an altar call to bring as many people to the front as possible. They would have told the crowd that they could avoid Hell simply by reciting a prayer. They definitely would have avoided discussing any doctrines that might offend people! Once they prayed that prayer and started attending church, they would

preach messages that the new people would accept. After all, if you preach hard truths then there's a good chance the new people would leave, and who wants that? The modern church is extremely focused on numbers. The more people you can pack in the better – and the easiest way to do that is to water down the truth and make it acceptable to everyone. So that's what churches do.

But that's not what Christ did! He knew that many of those who were following Him didn't actually believe in Him at all, so He deliberately preached something hard in order to get the false converts to leave. He only wanted *genuine* converts, not phonies. He used hard doctrine to separate the wheat from the chaff. The modern church would never dream of doing that today. What God wants us to do, and what the church is actually doing, are two very different things.

Altar calls are a great tool if your goal is to maximize the number of people in your pews. However, if you're trying to create genuine Christians who will stand the test of time then they're a terrible thing to use – *especially* when used in the careless way in which so many churches use them. As we can see, Christ took a radically different approach!

Do you want to save people? Then preach the gospel to them. Make sure that people understand it – *all* of it. Preach the hard truths. Tell them that genuine conversions result in a changed life which bears the fruits of the Spirit. Those who believe will come to Christ and truly be saved – and those who don't will be offended and driven away. Offending people may seem like a bad thing to do, but it's *far* better than making them think they're saved when they actually aren't. After all, it's *much* easier for someone who knows that they're lost to come to Jesus, than someone who's convinced they were saved at the altar when they really weren't.

Sermons

Sometimes when we're reading the Bible we come across passages that ought to startle us. The Bible says some pretty amazing things if we'll take the time to stop and think about what it's saying. All too often we simply read right over a passage without giving it any thought.

For example, after Nehemiah finished rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem, he did something else of great importance: he teamed up with Ezra to read the entire Mosaic Law to the people. Just stop and think about that for a moment! Imagine reading the *entire* Mosaic Law at once. That's quite a task!

The reason he did that was because the people of Jerusalem weren't very familiar with it. The Jews had been committing all kinds of sins, and living lives that didn't please God. To solve that problem Nehemiah and Ezra taught the people what God's commandments actually were:

Nehemiah 8:2: "And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month.

3 And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law.

4 And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; ...

5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up:

6 And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And

all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

7 ... and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place.

8 So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”

As you can see, the Levites put a lot of effort into this. They read the entire law of God, leaving nothing out. They read it distinctly so it could be understood. They also expounded upon the law so that people could understand what it actually meant. They wanted to make sure that everyone had heard the Mosaic Law and understood what it required.

Now, this was no small task. The Mosaic Law is much longer than just the 10 commandments; it contains a great many other rules as well. Anyone who has tried to read through Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy knows just how many commandments there actually are. While it's true that much of Leviticus deals primarily with priestly matters and regulations regarding sacrifices, there are *still* a lot of commandments in those four books.

The process of reading the Law would obviously have taken more than just a few minutes. We can see in Nehemiah 8:3 that Ezra read “from morning to midday”. In other words, this process took *hours*. This wasn't a 30-minute sermon! I'd also like to point out that this was *not* light reading material: after all, it was an exposition on the Mosaic Law. It didn't have any funny stories and it was *not* entertaining. If you've ever read those four books of the Bible then you know exactly what I'm talking about. That material is difficult, hard to read, and at times hard to understand.

Yet how did the people respond? Well, we're told in

Nehemiah 8:3 that even though this process took hours, all of the people listened attentively. In fact, they paid so much attention that they became convicted of their sins and began to weep:

Nehemiah 8:9: “And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.”

Not only did people pay attention for *hours* as the Levites expounded upon the *entire* Mosaic Law to them, but they also applied it to their lives and realized that they fell short! The people were so overcome by the magnitude of their sin that they began to weep. That's how much of an impact this had on them!

Do you know what would happen if someone tried something like this today? Imagine for a moment a pastor telling his congregation that he was going to spend the next 4 hours preaching a sermon on the entire Mosaic Law. If any pastor was foolish enough to try something like that, he would probably find himself out of a job. The congregation would bounce him right out of the pulpit and into the parking lot, and his days at that church would be over. There would be a riot!

The reason the congregation would riot is because modern Christians tend to have incredibly short attention spans when it comes to spiritual issues. Yes, the congregation will sit there while the pastor preaches a 30-minute sermon, but the odds are good they're not going to pay much attention to what he's saying. Instead of taking notes you'll find people balancing their checkbooks or just sleeping through the message. There are a few people who will pay attention to it, but those are the exceptions. Many people will have already forgotten most of what he said by the time they get out to the parking lot. If the preacher dares to go over 30 minutes then people will start to complain. Even going over the allotted time by seven minutes is enough to get people

upset. However, if the pastor's sermon is short – say he only talks for 20 minutes instead of 30 – then there will be rejoicing. People love short sermons and dislike long ones. This is true no matter how good the sermon is or how relevant it may be to their lives.

Why is this? The answer is pretty clear: people have a very limited appetite for preaching. Interestingly, I've never heard anyone complain that a service had too much singing. It's common for people to sit through an hour-long musical presentation at church without making a single complaint – but if the pastor ever tried to preach for an hour there would be a lot of unhappiness. The reason for this is simple: people like to listen to music, and they don't like to listen to preaching.

Now, I don't think it's *just* a problem of attention spans. After all, the same people who complain if a sermon goes five minutes over its expected time are willing to stay up until two in the morning if the baseball game they're watching goes into nine extra innings. They'll gladly watch a three-hour-long movie, or spend six solid hours watching reruns of television shows they've seen a dozen times before. When it comes to something *they actually care about*, time is no object. People who would riot at the thought of a four-hour sermon have no problem spending four hours watching a football game. It's easy to understand why: they believe that football is fun and exciting, and they believe that sermons (even really good ones) are kind of boring. People want to limit their intake of sermons.

I understand that there are some terrible preachers out there. I've heard pastors preach long sermons when they had nothing to say, and it was pretty painful. If your point can be made in 10 minutes then make your point and stop. Don't stretch it out just to hear yourself talk.

But the problem that we have in our churches is not a dislike of *bad* sermons, but a dislike of sermons altogether. Many people who go to church have very little interest in hearing the Word of God preached (which goes back to the fact that congregations are composed of a “mixed multitude” of saved people and unsaved people). This is in stark contrast to the people

we find in the Bible, who *did* care and who *did* pay attention.

As we can see in the example of Nehemiah, the people stood there for *hours* and listened. They cared about what was being said so much that they were overcome by conviction. They took the message to heart. King Josiah had the same reaction when the Mosaic Law was read to him:

2 Kings 22:8: “And Hilkiyah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. . .

10 And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiyah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king.

11 And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes.

12 And the king commanded Hilkiyah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king's, saying,

13 Go ye, enquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.”

Here we have another instance where someone read the *entire* Law! In this case the Mosaic Law was read to King Josiah. What was the king's reaction? The Bible says he was so overcome that he rent his clothes. Not only did he pay attention, but he understood what the Law meant. He knew that his nation had been disobedient and was in danger of facing the wrath of God. Conviction had set in and he knew the nation was in a lot of

trouble.

I realize these are exceptional cases. The Israelites didn't have the entire Law read to them on a regular basis – but when it was read, they listened. Have you ever tried to read the entire Mosaic Law in one sitting? I can't imagine any congregation allowing their pastor to read the whole thing to them in a single service; they would revolt. It simply wouldn't be tolerated. By modern standards that would be seen as a terrible sermon: dry, boring, and lacking amusing anecdotes. But when Shaphan the scribe read it to King Josiah, it had such a huge impact on him that it changed the course of the nation.

Do you know why? It's because Josiah cared deeply about honoring God with his life, whereas many people in our churches primarily care about being entertained. That's why Josiah eagerly listened to an hours-long recitation of hundreds of commands. His goal in life was *not* the pursuit of entertainment, but the pursuit of God. That's what he was passionate about.

Many people in our congregations primarily want to be entertained. If a sermon is fun then they will listen to it for a short time, but it had better be short or they will lose interest. Many Christians are focused on the pursuit of pleasure instead of the pursuit of God. This is why they have no patience for long messages. They have *lots* of attention for things that they care about, but God had better keep His messages short and fun.

Did you know that Joshua also read the entire Mosaic Law to the people? In fact, when he read the Law there were children present (as we discussed earlier in this series):

Joshua 8:34: “And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessings and cursings, according to all that is written in the book of the law.

35 There was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not before all the congregation of Israel, with the women, and the little ones, and the strangers that were

conversant among them.”

These children weren't sent off to children's church to get a more entertaining message. No, they had to behave and listen while Joshua spent *hours* reading the Law to them. That's pretty remarkable, isn't it?

This wasn't just an Old Testament thing. The apostle Paul also preached rather long sermons:

Acts 20:7: “And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.”

Incidentally, his sermon didn't stop at midnight. He actually kept preaching until the following morning:

Acts 20:11: “When he therefore was come up again, and had broken bread, and eaten, and talked a long while, even till break of day, so he departed.”

Can you imagine what would happen if the apostle Paul came to one of our modern churches and tried to preach a sermon that lasted *until morning of the next day*? I suspect the congregation's reaction would *not* be pretty! Now, if people were watching a baseball game and it didn't finish until after midnight, then people will stay up for that because it's baseball. But a *sermon* lasting that long is completely out of the question. Didn't Paul care about those poor people in the audience?

I'm not saying that all of Paul's sermons were this long, and I'm also not suggesting that short sermons are evil. There's nothing wrong with preaching short messages, and in many cases that is very appropriate. If what you want to say can be said in just a few words then do that and don't drag it out! There's also

the fact that (as we discussed earlier in this series) these sermons were probably interactive. The Levites who read the entire Mosaic Law to the people expounded on it. Things back then weren't like they are today, where people had to sit in silence. People were allowed to ask questions and get clarification. My point is that some of the sermons we find in the Bible were very long, and in spite of their great length they powerfully impacted the people who heard them. Yet if that same message was preached today the church would never tolerate it because of its length! Something has changed, and it's not the Word of God.

Do you know why Paul was able to preach to that group for so long? It's because they had a genuine heart for God and cared about what the apostle was saying. Christians used to care deeply about the things of God. For example, a 13th century Catholic Inquisitor by the name of Reinerius said this about the Waldensians:

“They can repeat by heart, in the vulgar tongue, the whole text of the New Testament and great part of the Old: and, adhering to the text alone, they reject decretals and decrees with the sayings and expositions of the Saints” (Faber, p. 492).

These days many Christians haven't even bothered to *read* the entire Bible. Yet these 13th century Christians cared so much about the Word of God that they actually memorized *virtually the entire Book* – and this was during a time when owning a single page of the Bible could get them burned at the stake! Their passion for Bible study actually endangered their lives. Many of them were killed for it – and yet they weren't deterred. Even though owning a Bible was punishable by death, they still owned them, studied them, and memorized them. *That* is how much they cared!

Can you imagine these devoted Christians limiting sermons to 30 minutes and complaining if they went five minutes

over? Can you imagine this group becoming irritated if the pastor spent a few minutes too long expounding on what the Word of God had to say? Of course not – it would be unthinkable to them. Things are different today, aren't they?

There is a preacher online who I enjoy listening to, who preaches sermons that are an hour and 45 minutes long. Since he has so much time he's able to go into incredible detail. What people don't realize is that if you only have 30 minutes to cover an entire passage then you're not going to be able to say very much about it. Imagine taking a 2-hour movie and cutting it down to half an hour. You're going to lose a lot when you do that! However, if you have more time then you can accomplish a lot more. Think of it this way: if you have to cover all 12 chapters of the book of Ecclesiastes in four 30-minute sessions then you are going to be extremely limited in how much you can bring out. More time would make a big difference – but Christians are unwilling to devote serious amounts of time to studying the Word of God. People claim that they simply don't have the time, but I find that hard to believe. According to Nielsen, the average American watches *34 hours* of television a week. Why is it out of the question to sacrifice ten of those minutes to give the preacher a little more time?

The real problem is that many people in our churches find the Word of God boring. They just don't really care about it, and they have no passion for spiritual things. They have lots of time for secular things that they find entertaining, but they have no interest in reading their Bibles, or studying them, or tolerating a sermon that's longer than a half-hour TV sitcom. People are passionate about things, but God is not on that list. People praise God with their lips during the Sunday morning service, but their hearts are far from Him. It's easy to see where their heart truly lies: just look at where they spend their time!

If only people cared as much about the Bible as our forefathers did, how different things would be! Maybe then people wouldn't go around thinking that the Sermon on the Mount was preached by Billy Graham.

Alliances

In modern times it's common for Christian groups to join forces with non-Christian organizations in order to accomplish some social goal – be it protesting some injustice, or feeding the hungry, or whatever the hot topic of the day might be. Christians will join with Catholics, Muslims, Mormons, Jews, and whoever else they can find in order to accomplish their goals. The justification for this is that while we may have differences we can all agree on this one thing, so why not work together to accomplish it?

The answer is simple: it's because the Bible forbids it. Our generation has forgotten the principle of separation, and the consequences have been devastating. The church needs to learn that ecumenicism – the idea that we should all get along and work together no matter what we believe – doesn't come from God. In fact, God is so opposed to it that He promised to curse those who are involved in such things.

I realize that's a strong statement, so let's look at the evidence. In 2 Chronicles 18 we can find the story of Jehoshaphat and Ahab. Jehoshaphat was a wise and godly king who the Lord gave great riches and honor. Ahab was an incredibly evil king who was married to the even-more-evil Jezebel. Despite their differences, Jehoshaphat thought it would be a good idea to join forces with Ahab and attack their common enemy:

2 Chronicles 18:1-3: “Now Jehoshaphat had riches and honour in abundance, and joined affinity with Ahab. And after certain years he went down to Ahab to Samaria. And Ahab killed sheep and oxen for him in abundance, and for the people that he had with him, and persuaded him to go up with him to Ramothgilead. And Ahab king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat king of Judah, Wilt thou go with me to Ramothgilead? And he answered him, I am as thou art, and my

people as thy people; and we will be with thee in the war.”

This is exactly the sort of thing that the modern church does. Jehoshaphat was good and Ahab was evil; Jehoshaphat worshiped the true God while Ahab worshiped pagan gods. Since they had a common enemy, Jehoshaphat thought it made sense for them to team up and work together. After all, the Syrians were dangerous and posed a threat to both kings. As the modern church would say, this is the Lord's battle, and if we can get unbelievers to join us in our fight then so much the better!

Except the battle did not go well. If you read chapter 18 you'll see that the prophet Micaiah warned against going to war at all, and prophesied that Ahab would be killed. Sure enough, Ahab actually was killed in that battle. When Jehoshaphat returned home, the prophet Jehu rebuked the king for joining forces with Ahab:

2 Chronicles 19:1-2: “And Jehoshaphat the king of Judah returned to his house in peace to Jerusalem. And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to king Jehoshaphat, Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the Lord? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the Lord.”

The Lord was *not at all* pleased that Jehoshaphat had made an alliance with Ahab. Even though they had a common enemy, Jehoshaphat was forbidden from joining forces with the wicked. The Lord didn't see it as two people attacking a common problem; He saw it as helping the ungodly and aiding those who hate the Lord. What the Lord focused on was the fact that *Jehoshaphat helped Ahab*, a king who hated God. What Jehoshaphat helped him do was beside the point. The Lord was upset that he had helped Ahab *at all*. Because of this, as the prophet Jehu said, “therefore is wrath upon thee from before the

Lord.”

Some may wonder, didn't the Lord command us to pray for our enemies and do good to them that hate us? Yes, He did. But the Lord did *not* command us to *join forces with them and help them accomplish their goals*. That is an entirely different matter! That's what Jehoshaphat did, and the Lord was very upset about it. The fact that the Syrians were evil and were also Jehoshaphat's enemy didn't matter to God at all.

Let's look at another case. After Ahab died another king arose named Ahaziah, who was also very wicked. Jehoshaphat thought it would be a good idea for the two of them to join forces and send some ships to Ophir to get gold (1 Kings 22:48). Once again we see a godly king teaming up with an evil king in order to accomplish something. Now, there was nothing wrong with going to Ophir for gold; King Solomon also sent ships out looking for treasure and acquired great wealth. Jehoshaphat thought that if both kings teamed up then they could both be enriched.

However, the Lord was not pleased:

2 Chronicles 20:35-37: “And after this did Jehoshaphat king of Judah join himself with Ahaziah king of Israel, who did very wickedly: And he joined himself with him to make ships to go to Tarshish: and they made the ships in Eziongaber. Then Eliezer the son of Dodavah of Mareshah prophesied against Jehoshaphat, saying, Because thou hast joined thyself with Ahaziah, the Lord hath broken thy works. And the ships were broken, that they were not able to go to Tarshish.”

What upset the Lord was *not* the purpose of the voyage. No, what really upset God was that Jehoshaphat had teamed up with the evil king Ahaziah. Because Jehoshaphat joined himself with a pagan king who hated God, the Lord destroyed the ships they had made. The Lord *hates* it when His people team up with

His enemies in order to accomplish something. It doesn't matter if their stated goal is something that's actually good. *He hates it!* In fact, He hates it so much that He promises *wrath* on those who dare to do such things. In the example above, God was so upset at their partnership that He actually destroyed the ships.

This same principle is repeated in the New Testament:

II Corinthians 6:14-17: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you."

People commonly apply this to marriage, but *Paul was not talking about marriage*. Marriage isn't even mentioned anywhere in the chapter! What Paul is saying is that Christians should *not join forces with pagans*. As Paul points out, light has no communion with darkness and righteousness has no fellowship with unrighteousness. They are *different teams entirely* and they are not to be "yoked together".

How many times did the apostles join forces with pagans in order to accomplish societal goals? *Zero times*. How many times did the church in the New Testament join with idol-worshippers to stamp out poverty, feed the hungry, or pursue some other goal? *Zero times*. Instead Paul condemns this practice – just as the practice was condemned in the Old Testament. God wants His people to be *separate* from the world. He doesn't want them

building alliances with the wicked; instead He wants His followers to “come out from among them, and be ye separate”.

This principle of separation is no longer followed by the modern church. It has ignored the clear teaching of 2 Corinthians 6:14-17. In fact, the church thinks it's *great* when they can team up with God-hating organizations in order to get things done! What God has to say about it is entirely forgotten – but God doesn't mince words about this:

2 John 1:10-11: "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds."

How does God say we should treat those who preach a false gospel? Does He say that we should join forces with them and try to find areas of commonality so we can build agreements? Nope. What He actually says is that we shouldn't even receive them into our home. In fact, we *shouldn't even bid them "godspeed"!*

Now, when John says “receive him not into your house” he's not forbidding us from sharing the gospel with them. What he *is* forbidding is helping them in any way, either in deed (by giving them a place to stay so they can keep preaching a false gospel) or in word (by bidding them godspeed). John is clear that those who help them, even verbally, become a “partaker of his evil deeds”.

Sadly, this is a sin that the modern church *loves* to commit. I once saw a case where a church learned that a mosque was undergoing renovations, so they invited the Muslims to *borrow their church building* so they could keep worshipping their false god. That's exactly the sort of thing that John was condemning – but instead of being dismayed, churches brag about this sinful behavior as a great example of “outreach” and “building bridges” and “true love”. God, however, calls it *being a partaker of their evil deeds* and hates it with a passion.

“Come out from among them, and be ye separate”, says the Lord. That is the commandment! God repeats it in Revelation and adds a threat:

Revelation 18:4: "And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues."

In this case the verse is talking about Babylon, the mother of harlots and abominations. God is commanding His people to come out of that wicked place and “be not partakers of her sins” – for those who *are* partakers of her sins will also partake of the plagues that God will send upon her. How do we become partakers of her sins? By joining forces with her and helping her in word or deed. We become partakers with the wicked when we refuse to separate ourselves from them.

The modern church has decided that it's not interested in separation, and instead eagerly tries to form alliances with as many God-hating organizations as it can possibly find. The church has no idea how much this angers God. The Lord didn't hesitate to discipline the righteous king Jehoshaphat when he committed this sin, and that is something we should take to heart.

False Teachers

Here's a question for you: is it right or is it wrong to call out false teachers by name? There are many people who call themselves Christian pastors but teach dangerous and heretical doctrines. For example, some “pastors” reject the Bible outright and claim we need to look elsewhere for the truth; some teach things that are contrary to the Bible; some twist the Scriptures to their own ends; some deny the virgin birth; some deny the resurrection of Jesus; some deny that Jesus is God; some deny the reality of Hell; and some claim that you can be saved apart from Jesus – just to name a few common heresies! Such people abound in today's world and have led many astray.

The question is, what should be done about it? Some pastors teach that it's wrong to ever call anyone a false teacher. They say that calling someone a false teacher is the same thing as judging them, and Christians “aren't supposed to judge people.” In their opinion the best thing to do is ignore them entirely. At most they might address the false teaching, but they never address the false teacher.

Others say that we should live by Thumper's motto. The rabbit from Bambi famously said that “if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.” I've heard people seriously suggest that this philosophy should guide everything we say. In other words, if we don't have anything nice to say about someone then it's best to keep silent. Calling someone a false teacher isn't nice, so we shouldn't say it. I'd like to point out that failing to deal with a situation is no different from ignoring it. The results are the same.

All of this brings up a question: what did people do about this problem in the Bible? Is this policy of ignoring false teachers actually Biblical? It's an excellent question, and fortunately it's easy to answer.

First of all, Jesus Himself made it quite plain where He stood. The Lord didn't hesitate to condemn false teachers in the strongest possible terms:

Matthew 23:27: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.

28 Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. ...

33 Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?”

As you can see, Jesus didn't mince words! He called the Pharisees hypocrites and a generation of vipers, and He did it *while they were standing there listening to Him*. There was nothing remotely “nice” about what He said! He actually told them, to their face, that they were very wicked men who were headed straight for Hell. The Lord *definitely* confronted both the false teaching *and* the false teacher.

Of course, Jesus was God, and that's an important distinction. Jesus has a right to judge everyone, and one day we will stand before Him and be held accountable for the way we've lived our life. God has every right to judge mankind, so the fact that He exercises that right shouldn't come as a surprise.

So let's look at another example. What did the apostles do when they were confronted with this sort of situation? Did they believe that confronting false teachers was wrong? Did they live by the “be nice at all costs” motto? Actually, they did not. For example, Paul had quite a bit to say about someone named Alexander:

I Timothy 1:19-20: “Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn

not to blaspheme.”

2 Timothy 4:14: “Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works:”

These are remarkable statements! Not only did Paul call Alexander out by name as an evil person (which isn't a “nice” thing to say!), but he said that he *delivered him over to Satan*. Before you panic, I'd like to point out that the reason Paul did this was so that Alexander could learn not to blaspheme. Paul hoped that by doing this Alexander would come to regret what he'd done and would repent of his sins. However, Alexander apparently didn't learn anything because in 2 Timothy Paul once again mentioned Alexander's wickedness and asked God to avenge Paul for all the evil things Alexander had done do him.

We can see that the apostle Paul called out two false teachers by name (Hymenaeus and Alexander). Paul didn't restrain himself to just addressing the false teachings themselves, and he didn't say “Well, let's be nice about it.” Paul never said anything remotely like “Even though some people are teaching false doctrines, it would be wrong and judgmental to call them out on it. We need to get along with such people and be nice to them.” No, Paul was pretty direct in saying that Alexander was evil and people needed to be aware of who he was and what he was doing.

This is not the only example of this that we can find in the Bible! There are many more cases where the apostles called out someone for being a false teacher or an evildoer:

Galatians 2:11: “But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.”

2 Timothy 4:10: “For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus

unto Dalmatia.”

III John 1:9-10: “I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church.”

This isn't just limited to the New Testament; you can find the same thing in the Old Testament as well. For example, Nehemiah names quite a few names:

Nehemiah 13:7-8: “And I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. And it grieved me sore: therefore I cast forth all the household stuff to Tobiah out of the chamber.”

Nehemiah 13:28-29: “And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was son in law to Sanballat the Horonite: therefore I chased him from me. Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites.”

Another place where you can find this is in the Psalms. In fact, there's a whole class of psalms called imprecatory psalms, in which the psalmist asks God to avenge him for some evil that was done to him. For example, one psalmist wrote this:

Psalm 69:22-28: “Let their table become a snare before them: and that which should have been for their welfare, let it become a trap. Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not; and make their loins continually to shake. Pour out thine indignation upon them, and let thy wrathful anger take hold of them. Let their habitation be desolate; and let none dwell in their tents. For they persecute him whom thou hast smitten; and they talk to the grief of those whom thou hast wounded. Add iniquity unto their iniquity: and let them not come into thy righteousness. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous.”

That's some pretty harsh language! Now, lest we think that these verses were simply the ravings of a godless lunatic, it's worth noting that we find the same sort of thing going on *in Heaven*. Take a look at what the book of Revelation has to say:

Revelation 6:9-10: “And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?”

Revelation 11:16-18: “And the four and twenty elders, which sat before God on their seats, fell upon their faces, and worshipped God, Saying, We give thee thanks, O LORD God Almighty, which art, and wast, and art to come; because thou hast taken to thee thy great power, and

hast reigned. And the nations were angry, and thy wrath is come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that thou shouldest give reward unto thy servants the prophets, and to the saints, and them that fear thy name, small and great; and shouldest destroy them which destroy the earth.”

Revelation 16:5-7: “And I heard the angel of the waters say, Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be, because thou hast judged thus. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy. And I heard another out of the altar say, Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments.”

I realize that we've strayed a little bit from the original topic, but there's an important point here. The modern church has been infiltrated with the idea that its primary role in life is to be *nice*. Calling out false teachers for heresy isn't nice, so many people say we shouldn't do it. Asking God for vengeance is *especially* not nice. The church believes that it needs to be nice at all times and never say anything that isn't positive and uplifting.

If you look at the Bible, however, it becomes obvious that this philosophy isn't the least bit Biblical. We aren't called to be nice; we're called to be loving, and that's an entirely different matter! There's nothing loving about refusing to tell people that sins are sinful. After all, the wages of sin is death! If you don't call out sin then you're allowing it to continue to claim one souls after another. Condemning it and urging people to repent of it is the only way to save them from its terrible consequences. We *must* call it out!

Likewise, there's nothing loving about refusing to confront false teachers. Life isn't a game where everyone goes to the same place after death and receives the same meaningless prize. We are

playing for keeps, and the reward is either everlasting life in paradise or everlasting torment in the Lake of Fire. There's no middle road or neutral ground! False teachers are denying everlasting life to millions of people and sending them down the road to Hell. They're like angry bears roaming around in crowded neighborhoods, looking for the weak and disabled so they can tear them limb from limb. If there was a rabid bear in your neighborhood you wouldn't ignore it on the grounds that we should be nice to bears; instead you would hide your children and then call animal control so they could capture the bear before it hurts anyone.

Refusing to name false teachers is devastating for many reasons. If no one confronts them then how will they learn that what they're doing is wrong? If no one names them then how will those who are weak or new to the faith find out that they should be avoided? There's nothing loving about refusing to warn people against people who teach that there's no Hell or judgment for sin. How many people are going to hear these false teachers and go away deceived because no one warned them? How many souls will be lost forever because those who knew better refused to do something about it?

The call to be loving means that sometimes we have to engage in behaviors that aren't very “nice”. Paul really did turn Alexander over to Satan, but the reason he did it was in the hope that Alexander might learn the error of his ways and change. Would it really have been better if instead Paul had done nothing and let Alexander continue down the road to eternal damnation?

Now, I realize that the imprecatory Psalms are a bit different. The key there is to realize that while God forbids *us* from taking revenge, He does *not* rebuke our thirst for justice. What God says is that when we've been wronged we should allow the Lord to take care of it. Those who have been martyred for the cause of Christ *do* thirst for justice to be done, as we saw in Revelation 6:9-10. The Lord doesn't rebuke this desire but instead promises that justice *will* be done. One day He will avenge His children, but that's a topic for another time.

Refusing to confront false teachers may be “nice”, but there's nothing loving about it. I fear that our refusal to combat false teachings *and* those who teach them only makes it easier for false teachers to guide millions of people down the road to Hell. After all, if you refuse to tell campers that a vicious wolf is roaming their campground, what do you think is going to happen? Is being “nice” really worth all the souls that it's going to cost?

Tithing

If you have been going to church for any length of time, you've probably heard a sermon about tithing. Pastors commonly teach that Christians must give 10% of their pre-tax income to their local church. They even go so far as to say that the curse of Malachi rests upon those who refuse to pay it:

Malachi 3:8-10: “Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.”

However, is this really true? Are Christians really commanded to do this? Does God actually curse believers if they don't give their local church ten percent of their pre-tax income? Before I answer these questions, let's take a look at the context of these passages. We need to understand what the Biblical tithe actually was before we can explore whether it still applies today.

In Numbers 8 the Lord gave a series of ordinances regarding the Levites. In case you're not familiar with them, the Levites were given the job of maintaining the tabernacle:

Numbers 8:19: “And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and to his sons from among the children of Israel, to do the service of the children of Israel in the tabernacle of the congregation, and to make an atonement for the

children of Israel: that there be no plague among the children of Israel, when the children of Israel come nigh unto the sanctuary.”

The reason the Levites were given this job is because in the Old Testament, before Jesus came, the Israelites weren't allowed to interact directly with God. This was because they (like everyone else) were sinful and unholy, and if they approached God in their unholiness they would die. In order to save their lives the Lord appointed the tribe of Levi to take care of the tabernacle.

The Levites were divided into two groups. Aaron and his sons were made priests, and were given the responsibility of offering the sacrifices. The rest of the tribe was charged with taking care of the tabernacle (and later, the temple). The priests and the Levites were the *only ones* who were authorized to serve in the tabernacle. The Lord was quite strict about this:

Numbers 18:22-23: “Neither must the children of Israel henceforth come nigh the tabernacle of the congregation, lest they bear sin, and die. But the Levites shall do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation, and they shall bear their iniquity; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, that among the children of Israel they have no inheritance.”

If you weren't of the tribe of Levi then you could not serve in the tabernacle, and the penalty for breaking this commandment was *death* (Numbers 18:22). Your eligibility to serve was determined by your ancestry. Although the temple had an outer court that non-Levites could enter once they purified themselves, no non-Levite was *ever* allowed to enter into the temple itself. (There were no exceptions to this! When King Uzziah broke this commandment the Lord immediately struck him with leprosy.) Even the High Priest (the oldest son of Aaron of each generation) could only enter the Holy of Holies *once a year* to make

atonement on behalf of the people, and before he could enter he had to offer a sacrifice to cleanse his own impurities (Hebrews 9:7).

Even if you *were* of the tribe of Levi, the requirements for being involved in temple service were very strict. As Numbers 8 and Leviticus 21 explains, not only did the Levites and priests have to come from the tribe of Levi, but they had to be of a certain age (starting at 25 and forcing mandatory retirement at age 50), have no physical handicaps (Leviticus 21:17-21), and abide by certain purification laws. These were the people who interacted with God on behalf of the nation of Israel, and they had to do things God's way all of the time or God would strike them dead. There was no margin allowed for error or personal flair! Nothing less than absolute holiness and perfection could enter His presence. (Incidentally, those requirements have not changed. The only reason we can enter into God's presence is because we are clothed in Christ's righteousness. His absolute perfection cleanses us of our sins and grants us entrance to Heaven. Those who try to enter on their own merits, or apart from Jesus, will find themselves lost and cast into Hell. There simply is no other way.)

All of this brings up a question: if you were a priest or Levite then where did you get your income? Well, when the land of Canaan was given to the Israelites the tribe of Levi wasn't given a portion of the land (Numbers 18:20). Instead they were to dwell in a series of cities that were set aside for them throughout the land of Israel (Joshua 21). The tithe was given to them as their inheritance:

Numbers 18:21: "And, behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tenth in Israel for an inheritance, for their service which they serve, even the service of the tabernacle of the congregation. ...

24 But the tithes of the children of Israel, which they offer as a heave offering unto the Lord, I have given to the Levites to inherit: therefore I

have said unto them, Among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance.”

However, the Levites did more than just maintain the temple. God designed Israel to be a theocracy, and the Levites served as the nation's government. They were the judicial system: cases were brought to them and they issued judgments (Deuteronomy 17:9-12). The Levites also served as the nation's education system, who were supposed to teach the people and guide the nation. They weren't just holy men: *they were the government!* Even in the time of the kings they still functioned as judges and teachers.

As was mentioned earlier, not all Levites were priests. The only Levites that were allowed to serve as priests were the descendants of Aaron. The priests operated the temple and offered sacrifices. When Israel gave the Levites the tithe, the Levites were to give a tenth of what they received to the priests:

Numbers 18:25-28: “And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Thus speak unto the Levites, and say unto them, When ye take of the children of Israel the tithes which I have given you from them for your inheritance, then ye shall offer up an heave offering of it for the Lord, even a tenth part of the tithe. And this your heave offering shall be reckoned unto you, as though it were the corn of the threshingfloor, and as the fulness of the winepress. Thus ye also shall offer an heave offering unto the Lord of all your tithes, which ye receive of the children of Israel; and ye shall give thereof the Lord's heave offering to Aaron the priest.”

It's interesting to note that the tithes weren't given directly to the priests. Instead the tithes were given to the Levites, who gave a tenth of what they received to the priests. The priests

themselves tithed to no one; they kept everything they received. In other words, the priests *only received 10% of the tithe!*

Another interesting fact is that every three years, the entire tithe was given to the poor. In those years none of it went to the priests:

Deuteronomy 26:12: “When thou hast made an end of tithing all the tithes of thine increase the third year, which is the year of tithing, and hast given it unto the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat within thy gates, and be filled;”

Also, did you notice how it says “of thine increase”? One important fact that's often overlooked is that the tithe was *not* an income tax. The Israelites weren't required to keep detailed financial records of all their income so that at the end of the year (when tithes were paid) they knew how much to give God. Instead the tithe was calculated based on *the increase of their net worth*. If their net worth didn't increase then they paid no tithe. This is how one person described it:

“The ancient Israelite calculated and paid his tithes only once per year, after the harvest. During the year, he bought and sold, exchanged his labour for other men's goods, and his goods for other men's labours; on none of this income did he pay any tithes. All year long, he and his family ate of the increase of the land and of the livestock. What he consumed in the course of the year was not recorded and added to his total harvest for the purpose of calculating his tithes. If he went fishing and caught ten fish in the middle of the year, he ate them all; he didn't save one of them to the end of the year in order to pay tithes on his fish. If he received some gold or

silver in an inheritance, he was not required to pay tithes on his inheritance. . . The Israelite was not commanded to tithe on everything he obtained and used throughout the year, but only on his increase at the end of the year.” (apostasynow)

So let's stop and take a quick review. Because the Israelites were not holy enough to interact directly with God, the Lord took one of the tribes of Israel and dedicated them to serving in the tabernacle on behalf of the people. Since they were dedicated to temple service the Lord gave them no inheritance in the land. Instead the Israelites were to give the Levites one tenth of their increase (*not* their income!), and the Levites were to live off of that. The Levites then gave a tenth of what they received to the priests so that they could operate the temple and perform the sacrifices.

This tithe was very important because it was the priests' entire livelihood. If the priests didn't receive the tithe then they couldn't do their job, and that was bad news for the nation because in order to approach God in the Old Testament *you had to go through a priest!* No one else could offer sacrifices or enter into the temple to inquire of God with the Urim and the Thummim. When people neglected the tithe the priests were forced to abandon the temple to find another means of survival, which that meant that the only people who were allowed to approach God were gone. That's why God became so angry when the tithe was neglected, and that's why Malachi 3:9 (which was quoted at the beginning of this discussion) says what it does.

Although the Levites as a whole received the full tithe, the priests only received 10% of it. However, every third year the *entire tithe* was given to the poor, and the priests didn't receive anything.

So, how does that compare to the modern practice of tithing? Do we still go through the tribe of Levi in order to approach God? Do Levites tithe to priests so that they can offer

sacrifices on our behalf? The answer, of course, is *no*. The sacrificial death of Christ on the cross changed everything.

You see, when Jesus died and rose again He replaced the Levites as our bridge to God. We no longer need a High Priest to make atonement for our sins each year in the Holy of Holies, because Jesus finished our salvation. Jesus is now our high priest! We no longer need to offer sacrifices because Jesus offered Himself once and for all as the perfect sacrifice:

Hebrews 9:11: “But Christ being come a high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building;

12 Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by His own blood He entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. . . .

24 For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us:

25 Nor yet that he should offer himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with blood of others;

26 For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.”

The reason Christians no longer need a class of Levites to interact with God on our behalf is because Christ's death has consecrated us as a nation of priests:

Hebrews 10:19-20: “Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way,

which He hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, His flesh;”

Revelation 1:5-6: “And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

1 Peter 2:9: “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that He should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light:”

It's very important to realize that there's no longer a tribe of Levi ministering to God on behalf of His people. Jesus bridged the gap between man's sinfulness and God's holiness. Christians are a royal priesthood and are able to boldly approach the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). In the past this would have brought instant death, but Jesus changed that forever.

In the Church Age pastors minister to the body of Christ, *but they are not Levites*. In order to be a Levite and serve in the temple you had to prove the purity of your lineage (that is, present documented evidence that all of your forefathers were from the tribe of Levi), you had to be ordained in a certain way, and you had to meet certain physical characteristics. The Levites pointed the way to what Christ would accomplish in His sacrifice, and that sacrifice has been made. Pastors today don't approach God once a year to atone for the sins of their congregations. They don't sacrifice animals on behalf of anyone. Their job is *completely different* from the Levites!

It's also worth noting that tithes were to be brought *into*

the temple. This can be seen in Malachi 3:10, where the Lord says “Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house”. In the Old Testament God didn't dwell within His people. Instead the glory of God resided in the Holy of Holies in the temple. When the High Priest entered into the Holy of Holies once a year he was going before the *actual presence of God* to intercede on behalf of the nation. God Himself dwelt within the temple, which can be seen in passages such as 1 Kings 8:10-11. The reason that the Jews no longer offer sacrifices is because they no longer have a temple. Modern Jews also don't tithe because tithes can *only* be given to the Levites, *and there are no Levites today*.

As Christ foretold when talking to the woman at the well (John 4:21-23), Christians don't gather at a single temple in order to approach the presence of God. This is because Christians *are* temples of the Living God! The Lord dwells within us, not inside a building in the Middle East:

1 Corinthians 3:16-17: “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.”

In other words, things are different now. The sacrifice of Christ changed everything – including the way that giving works. As we're about to see, what the apostles taught the church about giving is quite different from the system of tithing that's in the Mosaic Law.

It should be apparent by now that it's *impossible* for Christians to tithe according to the Law of Moses. The tithe could only be given to the Levites (Numbers 18:24) and there are no Levites today because Christ fulfilled the sacrificial system and brought it to an end. Even if the Levites still existed it would still be impossible for Christians to bring tithes into the temple because *there is no temple*. Instead Christ dwells within us,

making our bodies the temple of the Lord (1 Corinthians 3:16).

I want to emphasize this last point, because it's easily missed. It is *impossible* for Christians to offer the tithe that the Lord instituted in Numbers 18! It *cannot* be done. The only people who were allowed to receive the tithe were the Levites, not random Gentiles from your local community (or even random Jews, for that matter). The job of Levites was to offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins, which is something that pastors do not and cannot do. Pastors are *not* the same thing as Levites!

The curse and blessing of Malachi 3 simply cannot be applied to modern Christians. God was concerned about providing *the Levites* with a livelihood, but that group of people no longer exists. God no longer has a temple in which goods can be stored and given to a priestly class. *That entire system is gone!* Even if Christians wanted to bring food into the temple, it isn't possible because *there is no temple anymore*. The death and resurrection of Jesus changed everything.

To put it as plainly as possible, Christians today *cannot* tithe as instructed in the Law of Moses. It's not possible. They can give a portion of their income to their local church, yes, *but that's not tithing*. Tithing involved giving to Levites and there are no Levites. It involved bringing food into the temple and there is no temple. Have you ever met *anyone* who gave a tenth of their increase to a Levite? The truth is that no one has tithed according to the Law of Moses since the temple was destroyed in 70 AD. You *cannot* simply swap out pastors for Levites and churches for the temple and then say it's all the same thing. The New Testament simply *does not allow this* (which we'll get into a bit later.)

Many pastors teach that Christians are required to give a tenth of their pre-tax income to the church. I hope you can see by now that this isn't even close to the Mosaic Law of tithing. The Israelites tithed *of their increase* – that is, on the increase of their net worth at the end of the year. On top of that, the tithe went to the Levites, who functioned as Israel's government. The priests themselves only received a tenth of the tithe, or 1% of the

increase of Israel's net worth. There is simply *no way* you can turn “1% of the increase of your net worth” into “10% of your pre-tax income”. They're not even close.

But there's more. In the Old Testament, the priests never tithed because *the entire point of tithing was to support the priests*. I have yet to hear any pastor say that pastors are exempt from tithing. There's also the fact that every third year the entire tithe went to the poor and the priests received nothing. I've never seen any church try to implement *that* part of the Law either!

On top of that, if the temple was too far away you were allowed to spend the entire tithe on whatever you wanted:

Deuteronomy 14:22-27: “Thou shalt truly tithe all the increase of thy seed, that the field bringeth forth year by year. And thou shalt eat before the Lord thy God, in the place which he shall choose to place his name there, the tithe of thy corn, of thy wine, and of thine oil, and the firstlings of thy herds and of thy flocks; that thou mayest learn to fear the Lord thy God always. And if the way be too long for thee, so that thou art not able to carry it; or if the place be too far from thee, which the Lord thy God shall choose to set his name there, when the Lord thy God hath blessed thee: Then shalt thou turn it into money, and bind up the money in thine hand, and shalt go unto the place which the Lord thy God shall choose: And thou shalt bestow that money for whatsoever thy soul lusteth after, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever thy soul desireth: and thou shalt eat there before the Lord thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou, and thine household, And the Levite that is within thy gates; thou shalt not forsake him; for he hath no part nor inheritance with thee.”

Did you notice that verse 22 once again mentioned that the tithe was only *of their increase*, and not of their gross income? Did you see how God said that if the *one* place that was allowed to receive the tithes (the temple) was inaccessible or too far away, you were allowed to spend the money on whatever you wanted and literally eat it before the Lord? In other words, since there's no longer a temple, people who *really* wanted to keep the Mosaic Law of tithing should spend their entire tithe on steaks and have a big barbeque in their backyard! After all, *that's exactly what the Mosaic Law commands*. But I doubt you will ever hear a pastor say that, even though that's exactly what the Bible teaches.

So does the Mosaic Law *really* command Christians to give a tenth of their pre-tax income to their local church? It should be obvious by now that the modern practice of tithing is *not in any way* similar to the tithe that's specified in the Law of Moses. Pastors are not Levites, the local church is not the temple, and 10% of your pre-tax income is not the same as 10% of the increase of your net worth.

Is there a commandment in the New Testament stating that all Christians must give ten percent of their gross income to support their local body of believers? The answer is *no*. As it turns out, the New Testament model of giving is actually quite different.

Before we get into that, though, there's one other point I need to address. Some people claim that there are other examples of tithing apart from the Law of Moses. Take Jacob as an example:

Genesis 28:20: "And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, if God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God, and this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou

shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.”

This passage has been used to support tithing, but I believe it actually does the opposite. If Christians are required to tithe then why is Jacob offering to tithe if he returns in peace? After all, if God *already* required Jacob to give a tenth of his income then this whole vow is meaningless! *This is only a gift if Jacob wasn't required to give it.*

Plus, how did Jacob give this offering to God? There were no priests in those days because Levi hadn't been born yet (much less Aaron or the other priests). Jacob, who was a shepherd, must have sacrificed one-tenth of his flocks on an altar. He did *not* give the animals to his local tabernacle! Are Christians required to take their money into their backyard and burn it, *as Jacob did*? I've never heard anyone suggest that, but it's worth noting that the animals that Jacob gave did *not* go to support the local priesthood – instead they were slaughtered and burned. (It's worth noting that the tithe in Scripture was *always* a portion of crops or animals, and never money! Leviticus 27:30-32 is a good example of this. There was a monetary tax called the temple tax but that was completely different from the tithe.)

What's entirely missed is that Jacob's vow shows how little faith he had in God. The Lord had already given Jacob amazing promises, but instead of believing them Jacob tried to bribe God by saying that *if* God lived up to His end of the bargain then Jacob would pay God back for it. Jacob's tithe was intended to *bribe God into fulfilling His promise*. Is that really an example that Christians should follow?

Another example that people sometimes use to support tithing appears in Genesis 14:

Genesis 14:18-20: “And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most

high God, possessor of heaven and earth: And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all.”

After Abraham returned from conquering the armies that attacked the king of Sodom, he gave a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek. Some people have claimed that this proves Christians are required to tithe, but it should be noted that Abraham *gave* tithes. If they were required then he would have *paid* them, which is quite different! A gift is not required – it's given freely! If it's required then it's the payment of a debt, not a gift. Nowhere in this passage is it even suggested that Abraham was required to do what he did.

There's also the fact that Abraham was not tithing *his* property. The loot that he was tithing consisted of things he had recovered through his military victory. After Abraham gave the tithe he returned the rest of the loot to the kings of Sodom, which is who the goods had been stolen from. The loot Abraham tithed belonged to *them*, not to himself! There are *no* examples of Abraham actually tithing things *that belonged to him*.

In other words, when an enemy nation invaded a neighboring country, Abraham defeated the invaders with an army of his own, recovered the loot they had stolen, gave 10% of that loot to a third party, and returned the rest of it to its original owners. If you are determined to follow Abraham's “tithing” then *that* is how you need to do it.

Some people support the idea of mandatory tithing through this verse in Matthew:

Matthew 23:23: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and arise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”

We need to remember that when Jesus said this His crucifixion was still in the future, which means the Mosaic Law was still in force. Jesus had to perfectly fulfill the entire Mosaic Law, and He did. It's worth noting that Jesus also commanded the lepers He healed to go show themselves to the priests. I've never heard *anyone* suggest that those who have been healed of skin cancer should go to their local pastor before re-entering society – and yet that's also a commandment found in the Mosaic Law! The reason people don't do that anymore is because the entire Mosaic Law has been ended – and that includes the sacrificial laws, the ceremonial laws, the dietary laws, and tithing. Since Christ put an end to the Mosaic Law, the only commands that apply to the church are the ones that were given to the church in the New Testament.

If Christians are truly required to give a tenth of their gross income to the local church then you would expect to find that fact mentioned *somewhere* in the New Testament, but it's not. *There's not a single verse anywhere in the New Testament that commands Christians to tithe!*

Let me give a few examples. In Acts 4:32-5:11 the Bible talks about the financial support of the new church. Instead of tithing, though, Christians did something quite different:

Acts 4:34-35: “Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.”

Is this an example of tithing? No, it is not. If Christians were supposed to tithe then this would have been a great place to mention it, but that's not what the verse says.

There's also the case of Ananias and Sapphira. That couple

sold a piece of property and gave part of the proceeds to their local church. When they gave the money, though, they lied about it and said that they were giving the entire amount they had received. Although the Lord killed them for lying, it's interesting to notice what Peter said:

Acts 5:4: "Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? . . ."

Nowhere did Peter even hint that they owed a tithe on it to the church! If tithing was required then this would have been a great place to mention it, but Peter doesn't do that.

Another passage that has been used to support tithing is this one:

1 Corinthians 16:1-3: "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come. And when I come, whomsoever ye shall approve by your letters, them will I send to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem."

It's important to notice that Paul is asking the Corinthian church to gather together a sum of money that he can send to *destitute people in Jerusalem*. This is *not* being collected for the support of the local church, nor is any amount or percentage specified. Paul is simply asking the Corinthians to get together and provide for the needs of their brothers and sisters in a distant country. This is *not at all* the same thing as being required to give ten percent of your gross income to the local church! Once again, if tithing was required then this would have been a good place to mention it, but it wasn't mentioned.

In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul talks at length about giving, and he discusses the fact that there is nothing wrong with pastors receiving their income through the generosity of other Christians. Since pastors minister to people's spiritual needs, it makes sense for people to meet the pastor's physical needs. This is something we discussed earlier in this series:

1 Corinthians 9:9: "For it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen?"

10 Or saith he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope. ...

14 Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel."

This would have been a perfect time for Paul to bring up tithing, *but he didn't*. Tithing isn't mentioned anywhere in this chapter. That teaching is *entirely absent* from this rather lengthy discussion of giving – and on top of that, it's also absent from *all other discussions on giving in the New Testament*. Do you know how many people in the Bible followed the modern version of "tithing" by giving 10% of their pre-tax income to their local church? **Zero**. There is not a single case in the Bible of anyone ever doing that.

So how did giving work in the New Testament church? The answer can be found earlier in 2 Corinthians 9, which says this:

2 Corinthians 9:6-7: "But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also

bountifully, Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.”

In the Old Testament the Israelites were *required* to give a tenth of the increase of their crops and herds to the Levites. Anything that they gave above the tithe was a freewill offering, but the tithe was required. If the tithe was given then God would send blessings, and if the tithe was withheld then God would send curses and famine. The tithe was *not* a gift.

In the New Testament things are completely different. God wants us to give as we have purposed in our heart, out of love. There's no fixed amount specified, nor does God say that a tenth must be given to the local church before anything else can be given to other causes. God wants us to have a heart to meet the needs around us, and to give cheerfully out of love. The real issue is the heart, not percentages!

The truth is that *everything* we have belongs to God. We are *stewards*, not owners, and are commanded to use our possessions for the honor and glory of God. All of our wealth and energies and hopes and dreams are to be focused on the Lord's kingdom. God doesn't want a tenth of us; He wants *all* of us!

Christians should look at their financial resources and use them wisely for the Lord's glory. This doesn't just encompass tithing, but *everything* – paying bills, raising children, investing in education, buying groceries, and so forth. We can bring glory to God when we pay our debts, when we raise our children, when we instruct others in wisdom, when we provide for those in need, and when we bring the gospel to those who need it. God made the oceans, the rivers, the trees, and the fields, but too often Christians view life as being mostly secular with a few religious moments here and there. Being a Christian isn't something that you just do at church! It's the way you live your entire life. It affects how you manage your money, what entertainment you choose, what you do with your free time, how you raise your

children, and how you treat your neighbors. For Christians there's nothing that's purely secular. The Lord has laid a claim to every facet of our life.

God wants us to love and enjoy Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to be passionately devoted to following Him and loving our neighbors. That's what life is all about, and that's what life will *always* be about for the rest of eternity. God doesn't want a tenth of us; He wants *all* of us, devoted completely to Him in every way.

It may be that some people can give more while others don't have as much to give. In Christ's parables some of His servants had more talents than others. God isn't as concerned with the *amount* as He is with the *heart*. That's what it's really all about.

The truth is there's nothing remotely Biblical about the modern practice of tithing, and pastors who preach tithing are in error. The modern practice of tithing bears no resemblance to what the Mosaic Law commanded! No person in the Old or New Testament ever tithed the way that modern pastors command, and no passage in the New Testament commands Christians to give 10% of their gross income to the local church. I think this quote puts it well:

It is very difficult to come up with an exact set of figures on who got how much of the tithes in the end; but one thing is sure: the Temple in Jerusalem was not collecting 10% of the total income of the people, and at least 1/3 of the tithes were given to support education and poor people in their own community. How anyone with an honest mind can take the Mosaic Law of Tithing and come up with, "10 cents out of every dollar that passes through your hands belongs to the local church", eludes me. (apostasynow)

The great tragedy is that the New Testament actually has a

lot to say about how Christians should give, but the modern church has ignored its teachings in order to impose a system that has no Biblical foundation. The truth is that God doesn't want 10% us. Instead God wants us to see ourselves as His servants. He wants us to spend our life working for Him, using everything that we have and everything that we are for His glory. He wants us to think "I exist to glorify God and advance His kingdom, so how can I use my assets and talents to further that purpose?"

God has entrusted us with many things. He wants us to understand that we are *managers*, not owners. We need to realize that our assets are something that God has given to us so that we can invest them for His kingdom. What kind of a return are you giving God? When you settle accounts with Him, is He going to be pleased with your decisions?

Bible Translations

Anyone who walks into a Christian bookstore looking for a Bible will discover that there are a *lot* of different translations available. This can be very intimidating, especially if you're a new Christian and don't know very much about the Bible. Are all translations basically the same, or are some better than others? Given the number of different versions that are out there, how can you possibly tell which ones are good and which ones should be avoided? Is there any way to find out that doesn't involve going to seminary and learning Hebrew and Greek?

Most people don't spend a lot of time thinking about this. After all, it's a difficult subject and is rarely discussed in churches, but it's an important one. God expects us to live our lives by His Word. It's therefore *very* important to make sure that the Bible we're reading is an accurate representation of what God has said. If our translation of the Bible is wrong then we're in a lot of trouble.

One fact that complicates the matter is that the Bible wasn't written in English. The original manuscripts contain a variety of languages, with the Old Testament being predominately Hebrew and the New Testament being predominately Greek. Before we can understand the Bible it has to be translated, and translating ancient languages is difficult.

When people walk into a Christian bookstore and look at the different versions of the Bible, they generally assume that they are looking at different translations of the same manuscript. In other words, they think that different translators took the same ancient manuscript and translated it in different ways. However, that is *not* the case. There are actually *two* groups of manuscripts, not one, and some Bible versions are based on one while others are based on the other. What you are seeing is not different translations of the *same* document, but translations of *different documents*.

You see, there are two different manuscript families: the Received Text (which is sometimes called the Textus Receptus)

and the Critical Text (which is sometimes called the Westcott-Hort text). Some translations are based on one while other translations are based on the other. Here is how it breaks down:

Bible Translations based on the Received Text: King James Version (KJV), Geneva Bible, Great Bible, Matthew's Bible, Coverdale Bible, Tyndale Bible

Bible Translations based on the Critical Text: Everything else. (CEV, ESV, GW, GNT, HCSB, ISV, JBP, NAB, NASB, NCV, NET, NIV, NJB, NLT, NKJV (New King James Version), NRSV, REB, TNIV, TM)

One thing you may not have realized is that the New KJV is *not* an updated version of the KJV. It is actually a new translation of the Bible that's based on an entirely different manuscript than what the KJV is based on. (Yes, I know you were told that the NKJV was just an updated version of the KJV, but that is simply not true.)

The reason the KJV is different from the NIV is because they are translations of *different things*. Basically, all versions of the Bible released before the 19th century were based on the Received Text, while all versions since then (NIV, ESV, etc.) are based on the Critical Text.

This raises some important questions. Just what are the differences between the Received Text and the Critical Text? Are there any differences that matter, or are they both basically the same? Is there any reason to trust one manuscript family over the other? Where did these manuscripts come from and what are their histories? These are important questions, and I will try to answer them.

The first point I'd like to make is that the Received Text and the Critical Text are different, and they are different in ways that affect the meaning of the text. Take the New Testament, for instance: the differences between the two manuscript families affect 7% of its content. The Critical Text deletes 9,970 Greek

words out of 140,521, which amounts to almost 34 pages – roughly the combined lengths of Jude and Revelation¹. This is not a minor difference! The Critical Text (which is the basis for all translations of the Bible since the 19th century) eliminates 45 entire verses and 185 partial verses, along with individual words all throughout the text. The Critical Text either omits or flags as unreliable these verses:

- Matthew 12:47: “Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee.”
- Matthew 17:21: “Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.”
- Matthew 18:11: “For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost.”
- Matthew 21:44: “And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.”
- Matthew 23:14: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.”

- Mark 7:16: “If any man have ears to hear, let him hear.”
- Mark 9:44: “Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.”
- Mark 9:46: “Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.”
- Mark 11:26: “But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.”
- Mark 15:28: “And the scripture was fulfilled, which saith, And he was numbered with the transgressors.”
- Mark 16:9-20 (This is the entire ending of the book of

¹ Thomas Strouse, *Review of “From the Mind of God to the Mind of Man”*, November 2000.

Mark, including the Great Commission!)

- Luke 17:36: “Two men shall be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left.”
- Luke 22:43-4: “And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”
- Luke 23:17: “(For of necessity he must release one unto them at the feast.)”

- John 5:4: “For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.”
- John 7:53-8:11 (This is the story of the woman taken in adultery)

- Acts 8:37: “And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”
- Acts 15:34: “Notwithstanding it pleased Silas to abide there still.”
- Acts 24:7: “But the chief captain Lysias came upon us, and with great violence took him away out of our hands,”
- Acts 28:29: “And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, and had great reasoning among themselves.”

- Romans 16:24: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.”

- 1 John 5:7: “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.”

These verses are all in the Received Text, but they are not in the Critical Text. Bibles based on the Critical Text either question these verses by adding a footnote saying they're not reliable, or eliminate them altogether. For example, try looking up Acts 8:37 in your NIV Bible. It's not there, is it? But it *is* in the KJV.

The differences go beyond missing verses or passages. There are also many places where the individual verses are different in some way. I've given a few examples of this below, to illustrate the fact that the differences between the Received Text and the Critical Text are not trivial. In these examples I'm using the KJV to illustrate the Received Text and the NIV to illustrate the Critical Text. Keep in mind that these differences are *not* due to different ways of translating the same manuscript. It is due to the fact that the two versions are based on different manuscripts.

Colossians 2:18

KJV: "Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,"

NIV: "Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions."

KJV says "hath not seen" while NIV says "has seen". One is opposite the other.

Luke 2:14

KJV: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

NIV: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

KJV says God's good will is toward men; NIV says it is toward men on whom His favor rests. These are not the same.

Mark 9:24

KJV: “And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.”

NIV: “Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!””

KJV says that the father called Jesus Lord; the NIV does not.

Romans 14:10

KJV: “But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.”

NIV: “You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.”

KJV says that we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ, thus identifying Christ as God and saying that we will stand before Him to be judged. The NIV only identifies it as being God's judgment seat and removes the reference to Christ as God.

Ephesians 3:9

KJV: “And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ:”

NIV: “and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.”

The KJV says that God created all things by Jesus Christ; the NIV does not specifically single out Jesus Christ as the Creator.

Fasting

The NIV removes almost every reference to fasting in the New Testament, including the only verse in the New Testament that gives a reason for fasting. The verses that are altered are: Matthew 17:21, Mark 9:29, Acts 10:30, 1 Corinthians 7:5, 2 Corinthians 6:5, 2 Corinthians 11:27.

Matthew 5:22

KJV: “But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.”

NIV: “But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again,

anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."

The KJV says angry without a cause; the NIV just says angry. This entirely changes the meaning of what Christ said.

As you can see in just this handful of examples (and there are many more!), the Received Text and the Critical Text are not "basically the same". In fact, this is what one group of translators had to say about it:

"The King James Version has grave defects. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the development of Biblical studies and the discovery of many manuscripts more ancient than those upon which the King James Version was based, made it manifest that these defects are so many and so serious as to call for revision of the English translation." (Preface to the Revised Standard Version)

For the record, I *do not* agree with this translator. I think the Critical Text is the one that has the grave defects! The reason I used this quote is because I wanted to show you that the people who created the Critical Text did so because they rejected the Received Text and wanted something *different*. There are significant differences between the two – which means that translations based on the Critical Text (such as the NIV or even the NKJV) are different in important ways from translations based on the Received Text (such as the KJV or the Geneva Bible).

Given that the two texts are different, the question becomes this: which text is better? Where did the Received Text and the Critical Text come from? Are there any reasons to trust one over the other?

The Received Text (or *Textus Receptus*, as it is usually called) has a very simple origin: it is the version of the Bible that has been copied and recopied throughout the centuries and handed down through time. It is based on the idea that God has divinely preserved His Word and that the Bible has not become corrupted or lost. This is important, because the Critical Text is based on the idea that the Bible *has* been lost and needs to be reconstructed by scholars. (I will talk more about that in a little bit.)

Back in the 16th century there were multiple copies of the Greek New Testament available. Erasmus (one of the most eminent scholars of that period) collected these copies and divided them into two groups: those that were the generally accepted (or “generally received”) texts which were held and used by the Greek churches, and those that were based on manuscripts provided by the Catholic Church. Erasmus created what we now call the Received Text by using the manuscripts that had been passed down through time and held by the Greek churches. He ignored the manuscripts that the Catholic Church possessed because he believed they had been corrupted. (The manuscripts that were held by the Catholic Church were later used as the basis for the Critical Text.) After spending many years gathering his source material and separating the manuscripts, he compiled his Greek New Testament in a relatively short amount of time (less than a year).

The Greek texts that Erasmus based his New Testament upon were *not* ancient manuscripts, but were copies that had been copied from other copies down through the centuries. (There are some surviving manuscript fragments that are very old indeed, but no complete manuscripts exist.) This copying process was incredibly exacting. Some of the rules that were used by the ancient scribes are:

- Each column must have no less than 48 and no more than 60 lines. The entire copy must first be lined.
- No word or letter could be written from memory. The

scribe must have an authentic copy before him, and he must read and pronounce each word aloud before writing it.

- Revisions must be made within 30 days after the work was finished; otherwise it was worthless. If three mistakes were found on any page then the entire manuscript was condemned.
- Every word and every letter was counted. If a letter was omitted, an extra letter inserted, or if one letter touched another, the manuscript was condemned and destroyed.
- Copies were made from older copies, but in the process the older copies would wear out from use, which led to their demise. This is why there are no ancient copies of the manuscripts that Erasmus used: they had disintegrated long ago from being copied. There are some examples of very ancient manuscripts that are nearly complete, like the Latin Vulgate, but the reason they survived is because people believed they had been corrupted and refused to use them as source material. In short, the manuscripts that were seen as trustworthy were worn out and lost, while the ones viewed as corrupted survived because no one used them.

In summary, the Received Text is based on the idea that the manuscripts that had been handed down through the centuries were still accurate, had not been corrupted, and could be trusted. People held to this view because they believed that God had divinely preserved His Word through time; they did not believe it had become lost or corrupted.

There are a number of translations that are based on the Received Text. The most famous one is the King James Bible (but *not* the New King James Bible). Other translations based upon it include the Geneva Bible and the Tyndale Bible.

The Critical Text is based upon the idea that the Bible has been corrupted over time, and we can never really know exactly what it said. Instead, the best we can do is try to reconstruct the

Bible through the guesswork of scholars, using manuscripts provided by the Catholic Church. Proponents of this view *do not* believe that God preserved His Word. It should be noted that the Critical Text forms the basis of *all translations of the Bible since the 19th century* (NIV, ESV, NAS, etc.).

The founding principle of the Critical Text is the idea that the text of the Bible has been lost and the best we can do is come up with an approximation of what the Bible might have said. Lest you think I am exaggerating, here are a few quotes from supporters of the Critical Text:

“The ultimate text, if there ever was one that deserves to be so called, is for ever irrecoverable.” (F. C. Conybeare, *History of New Testament Criticism*, 1910, p. 129)

“We do not know the original form of the gospels, and it is quite likely that we never shall.” (Kirsopp Lake, *Family 13, The Ferrar Group*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1941, p. vii)

“It is generally recognized that the original text of the Bible cannot be recovered.” (R. M. Grant, “The Bible of Theophilus of Antioch,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 66, 1947, p. 173)

“In general, the whole thing is limited to probability judgments; the original text of the New Testament, according to its nature, must be and remains a hypothesis” (H. Greeven, *Der Urtext des Neuen Testaments*, 1960, p. 20, cited from Edward Hills, *The King James Version Defended*, p. 67)

“The primary goal of New Testament textual

study remains the recovery of what the New Testament writers wrote. We have already suggested that to achieve this goal is well nigh impossible. Therefore we must be content with what Reinhold Neibuhr and others have called, in other contexts, an 'impossible impossibility'" (R. M. Grant, *A Historical Introduction to the New Testament*, 1963, p. 51)

"...every textual critic knows that this similarity of text indicates, rather, that we have made little progress in textual theory since Westcott-Hort; that we simply do not know how to make a definitive determination as to what the best text is; that we do not have a clear picture of the transmission and alteration of the text in the first few centuries; and, accordingly, that the Westcott-Hort kind of text has maintained its dominant position largely by default" (Eldon J. Epp, "The Twentieth Century Interlude in New Testament Textual Criticism," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 43, pp. 390-391)

I'm going to repeat this one more time: the basic idea behind the Critical Text is that the original text of the Bible has been lost, and the best we can do is make educated guesses about it. Note how the people quoted (all *supporters* of the Critical Text) talk about "probability judgments" and the "recovery" of the New Testament. While the Received Text is based on the idea that God *has* preserved His Word, the Critical Text is based on the idea that God *has not* preserved His word.

The Critical Text is also called the Westcott-Hort Text because of the two primary men behind it, Brooke Foss Westcott (1825-1901) and Fenton John Anthony Hort (1828-1892). Both of these men denied the infallibility of the Scriptures, believed that the Bible was mostly myth and not literal history, and

claimed that Christ's death did not atone for our sins. There are many quotes from them that I could give, but I think these are enough to illustrate what they thought about the Bible:

“...the popular doctrine of substitution is an immoral and material counterfeit.” (Hort to Westcott, 1860, cited in *Life of Hort*, Vol. I, p. 430)

“No one now, I suppose, holds that the first three chapters of Genesis give literal history – I could never understand how any one reading them with open eyes could think they did...” (Westcott, writing to the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1890, cited in *Life and Letters of Brooke Foss Westcott*, Vol. II, p. 69)

“I am inclined to think that no such state as 'Eden' (I mean the popular notion) ever existed, and that Adam's fall in no degree differed from the fall of each of his descendants...” (Westcott, *Life and Letters of Brooke Foss Westcott*, Vol. I, p. 78)

As you can see, not only did these men reject the idea that Christ died in our place to save us from our sins, but they condemned that very idea as being *immoral*. These two men were *not* Christians and held a very low view of Scripture.

These men based their Critical Text on two major manuscripts that came from the Catholic Church (the Sinaiticus and Vaticanus), along with a handful of Egyptian manuscripts. Some of these documents were known to Erasmus when he assembled the Received Text, but like many of his contemporaries Erasmus rejected them because he thought they were corrupt.

The Vaticanus codex (also known also as Codex B) comes from the Vatican Library. Its history dates back to 1475, when it

first appeared in the Vatican Library catalog. It is thought to date back to 4th century Egypt. The Sinaiticus codex (known also as Codex Aleph) was discovered by Constantine Tischendorf at Saint Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai; he found the first part of it in 1844 and the second in 1859. Tischendorf found it in a wastebasket, where it had been placed with a lot of other papers that were about to be used to light a stove. (In other words, he found Codex Aleph in the garbage. It had literally been thrown away and was about to be burned!) These two documents form the majority of the differences between the Received Text and the Critical Text. When you see a footnote in your Bible that says “Some ancient manuscripts do not have this verse”, it is referring to Codex Aleph and Codex B.

There are a couple points about these ancient manuscripts that should be mentioned. First, all of these documents are thought to have come from ancient Egypt, which was a hotbed of ancient heresies. If you were looking for accurate, faithful copies of the Scriptures it would be hard to pick a worse spot to look than ancient Egypt. At that time the people there had not only rejected orthodox Christianity, but they also thought nothing about modifying the text of the Bible itself. Dr. Edward Hills said this about the subject:

“For all these documents come from Egypt, and Egypt during the early Christian centuries was a land in which heresies were rampant. So much so that, as Bauer (1934) and van Unnik (1958) have pointed out, later Egyptian Christians seem to have been ashamed of the heretical past of their country and to have drawn a veil of silence across it. This seems to be why so little is known of the history of early Egyptian Christianity. In view, therefore, of the heretical character of the early Egyptian Church, it is not surprising that the papyri, B, Aleph, and other manuscripts which hail from Egypt are liberally sprinkled

with heretical readings” (*The King James Version Defended*, p. 134)

Second, these documents do not agree among themselves. There are 3,036 differences *in just the Gospels*, not counting minor errors such as spelling (Herman Hoskier, *Codex B and its Allies*, vol. II, p. 1). Not only do these documents have serious disagreements with the Received Text, but they also have serious disagreements with each other!

Incidentally, this is why the supporters of the Critical Text talk about “probability judgments”. Since their two favorite manuscripts don't agree with each other, it's up to each scholar to decide for himself which version of a passage he likes the best.

Third, given that both Codex Aleph and Codex B were found in the possession of the Catholic Church, and that a manuscript very similar to it (the Latin Vulgate) has their official approval, we should take a moment to discuss how the Catholic Church views the Bible. The Catholic Church does not believe that the Bible is authoritative in and of itself. Instead it teaches that the Scriptures derive their authority from the Catholic Church and that *only Catholicism* has the power to decide what is canon and what is not. Catholic fathers like Origen (185 AD – 254 AD), Eusebius (270 AD – 340 AD), and Jerome (340 AD – 420 AD) didn't see a need to preserve the original Scriptures. Eusebius modified the text at will (not translated it, but *actually changed it*) and Jerome continued his efforts by preserving as canon the changes that Eusebius had made. Jerome's version became the official version of the Catholic Church, and the Council of Trent declared that it is the only authoritative version of the Scriptures – even though churches outside the Catholic Church refuse to have anything to do with it.

On top of all this, there's an even larger issue: given the way the Catholic Church spent *fifteen centuries* hunting down and killing people for believing that you're saved by grace through faith apart from works, why would any Protestant believe what they have to say about the Bible? Not only has the Catholic

Church preached a false gospel for more than a thousand years, but they have aggressively persecuted those who reject Catholicism. Over the course of its history the Catholic Church has murdered an estimated *50 million people*. Given the sheer number of people they have killed over the past 1500 years, it's quite possible that the Catholic Church is the worst enemy that Christianity has ever had. Why would any Protestant believe what they have to say about the text of the Bible?

It should also be noted that the Catholic Church has *vigorously* opposed Bible ownership. In fact, for more than a *thousand years* the Catholic Church ruthlessly hunted down and executed people for the crime of having a copy of the Bible. **Pope Gregory IX (1227 – 1241)** prohibited people from owning Bibles and prohibited Bible translations from being made. The **Council of Toulouse (1129)** and the **Council of Tarragona (1234)** prohibited people from possessing *or reading* translations of the Bible that were made in the common languages (the only languages that people could actually understand). Those who were found to possess Bibles (or portions thereof) were executed and their Bibles were burned. **Pope Gregory X (1271 – 1276)** ordered that all copies of the Bible that had been translated into the common tongues be brought to Bishops and burned. **Pope Julius III (1550 – 1555)** issued a series of bulls commanding the destruction of all heretical and Lutheran books. This included vernacular translations of the Bible. **Pope Paul IV (1555 – 1559)** prohibited the possession of Bible translations not permitted by the Inquisition. Those who were found to possess Bibles were executed.

The Council of Trent prohibited *anyone* from reading the Bible without a license. **Pope Clement VII (1592 – 1605)** forbade anyone from granting these licenses, thus prohibiting the common people from reading the Bible under any circumstances. He then sent “missionaries” to the valley of Piedmont *for the express purpose of destroying all Bibles in that area* and those who owned them. Nicholas Walsh was murdered while in the act of translating the first Irish New Testament. **Pope Benedict XIV**

(1740 – 1758) confirmed the Council of Trent's prohibitions against Bible translations. **Pope Pius VII (1800 – 1823)** *condemned* the Bible societies of the 19th century – and on and on it goes.

Given that the Catholic Church has a history of both modifying the text of the Bible *and executing people who dared to own a copy of it*, why would anyone believe that the manuscripts they provided can be trusted? The Catholic Church has done its very best to stamp out Bible ownership entirely. They have killed millions of people for rejecting the doctrine of salvation by works. When they come forward and claim that certain words and verses ought to be deleted from the Bible based on manuscripts *that they have provided*, why would anyone believe them?

All of this is on top of the fact that Codex Aleph and Codex B are quite different and contradict each other in many places. Since the two manuscripts are so inconsistent, Westcott and Hort developed something called Textual Criticism in order to reconcile the problems. (This, incidentally, is where the name “Critical Text” came from). Some of its guiding principles are as follows:

- In matters of textual criticism, the Bible is to be treated just like any other book.

Westcott and Hort believed that there is no principle of divine inspiration and preservation. They didn't believe that God had preserved His Word, or that there was anything special about the Bible. This is how they put it:

“The principles of criticism explained in the foregoing section hold good for all ancient texts preserved in a plurality of documents. In dealing with the text of the New Testament no new principle whatever is needed or legitimate”

(Westcott and Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, vol. 2, Introduction and Appendix, 1881).

The next time someone mentions “textual criticism”, remember that one of its guiding principles is that *there is nothing special about the Bible*.

- Early Christians were not careful about the text of the New Testament and had no special interest in its exact preservation.

Westcott and Hort believed that Christians were careless when they copied the New Testament and didn't really care if their copies were accurate or not. That is completely wrong! As we mentioned earlier, the copies that were handed down through the centuries were made with great care.

However, this *was* true in ancient Egypt – *the very place where Westcott and Hort got the manuscripts they used to create their Greek New Testament!* They chose to reject manuscripts that had been carefully copied for centuries, and instead used manuscripts from a region that was known for both careless copying and tampering with the text!

- The Received Text that creates the foundation of the King James Bible is consistent because in the 4th century a group of editors got together and smoothed out any differences.

Westcott and Hort believed that the only reason the Received Text manuscripts are so uniform and free from contradiction (which should be a big point in their favor) is because someone got together and fixed all of the manuscripts. The problem with this theory is that there's no evidence such a council ever happened. One person put it this way:

“The weakness of Westcott and Hort's theory of a 4th century Syrian revision which resulted in the substitution of the majority text of the B Aleph text is that such a revision is unknown to history. The whole scheme rests upon a supposition for which there is no historical evidence, and consists largely in making dogmatic assertions based upon uncertainties” (Terence Brown, *What is Wrong with the Modern Versions of the Holy Scriptures?* Trinitarian Bible Society, Article No. 41)

- The traditional text (received text) did not exist prior to the middle of the third century.

Westcott and Hort believed that the Received Text was only invented in the middle of the 3rd century and didn't exist before that. This is not true! Writings of the Church fathers that predate the 3rd century contain thousands of quotations from it. Let me repeat that, in case you missed it: when the early Church quoted from the Bible they quoted the *Received Text*. Their quotations do *not* match the Critical Text. That alone ought to tell you which version can be trusted and which one can't.

- Manuscripts that are characterized by contradictions should be preferred over those that are not.

Westcott and Hort believed that manuscripts that were full of contradictions and problems were the best ones to use. They avoided clean manuscripts and preferred to work with texts that were full of problems and errors!

- Textual critics can use guesswork to determine the true correct

reading.

Westcott and Hort believed that the true reading could be determined *by guesswork*. All a critic had to do was look at the different readings and pick the one they liked the best. Lest you think I'm making this up, I checked the translator's notes at the back of my NIV Bible. This is what they had to say:

The Greek text used in translating the New Testament was an eclectic one. No other piece of ancient literature has such an abundance of manuscript witnesses as does the New Testament. Where existing manuscripts differ, the translators made their choice of readings according to accepted principles of New Testament textual criticism. Footnotes call attention to places where there was uncertainty about what the original text was.

The word “eclectic” means “selecting or choosing from various sources”. The translators of the NIV actually come right out and admit that the NIV is based on manuscripts that contradict each other. In order to arrive at a final reading the translators used the rules of *textual criticism* – the very rules that we just discussed! A group of translators picked the reading they happened to like the best and just went with it – and that is the foundation for *every single modern translation of the Bible*. The only translations of the Bible that are *not* based on textual criticism are ones that predate the 19th century, like the King James Bible and the Geneva Bible.

This issue really comes down to just one point: either God *did* preserve His Word, or He did not. If He did then we can know with certainty what God has revealed to mankind. We can live with confidence because we know that the words written in the Bible truly are the actual words of God. We can trust it with our lives because it contains exactly what God has said.

However, if God did *not* preserve His Word then that means His Word has been lost. It means that the Bible *might* contain God's revelation, but then again it might not. The Bible might have critical omissions or errors. Important things may have been lost. All we can do is trust scholars to make their best guesses and then hope that those guesses are right. It means we have to trust a document that *isn't trustworthy*.

Many people agree that the original autographs are inspired and infallible and perfect in every way, and that's good as far as it goes. However, that doesn't address the most important point of all: did God preserve His Word throughout the centuries, or has it been lost? If God didn't preserve the Bible in that perfect state then the fact that the original manuscripts were perfect is completely irrelevant, because we don't have access to those manuscripts! The Bible's inspiration only matters *if the original text has been preserved throughout the centuries*. If it hasn't then the best we can do is make guesses about what God might have said. It means that the eternal, all-powerful God revealed His Word to mankind, commanded us to base our very lives on it, and then allowed it to be lost and corrupted. Let me repeat that: it means that *Jesus willingly died for our sins but refused to keep His Word from being lost*. If that's true then the salvation of your soul depends upon a document that can't be trusted and which might be wrong in critical ways.

It's worth noting that God promised *repeatedly* that He would preserve His words – not His thoughts or ideas, but His *words*. Take a look for yourself:

Matthew 5:18: "For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled."

Matthew 24:35: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."

Isaiah 40:8: "The grass withereth, the flower

fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever."

God could not be more clear: "my words shall not pass away." He didn't say that His basic thoughts or ideas would be preserved; He said that His *words* would be preserved! That is a very important promise.

Incidentally, it's useless to say "Well, God preserved His Word in Heaven, but it's been corrupted and lost on Earth". You see, God gave His Word to *mankind*. If His Word has been lost on Earth then it can no longer accomplish its purpose! A Word that has been preserved in Heaven but lost on Earth is completely useless to us. After all, God gave the Bible to us so that we might have hope:

Romans 15:4: "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope."

If the Word has been lost then how can we have hope in it? How can we proclaim the gospel to the whole world (which is what God commanded us to do) if the Bible has been corrupted and we no longer know what it says? If the Bible hasn't been preserved then it *cannot be trusted* – and if the Bible cannot be trusted then Christianity cannot be trusted either.

Despite what you may think, this isn't about the King James Bible or the NIV Bible. The real issue is the two different manuscript families and the philosophies that are behind them. The Received Text is based upon the idea that God has preserved His Word through the centuries and we can trust the text that has been copied and recopied. It claims that the text of the Bible has *not* been lost but has been divinely preserved. The King James Bible, the Geneva Bible, and the Tyndale Bible are all based on this.

On the other hand, the Critical Text is based on the idea

that the text of the Bible *has* been lost. It claims that the manuscripts we should trust the most are the ones that come from the Catholic Church – the very same church that spent more than *a thousand years* hunting down and murdering anyone who dared to own a copy of the Bible. It claims that while we can never really know what the Bible originally said, we can come up with an approximation by applying guesswork and the rules of textual criticism – rules made up by two men who believed that the Bible was largely myth and that Christ's death did not atone for our sins. The Critical Text is missing more than 30 pages of text from the New Testament, including individual words, verses, and entire passages. All modern translations are based on this foundation, including the ESV, the NIV, the NAS, the New KJV, the HCSB, and so forth.

Let me say this one more time: the real issue is *the manuscripts that the translations are based on*. Some churches proudly proclaim that they are “KJV Only” and denounce all other translations as coming straight from Hell. Some claim that the KJV is a divinely inspired translation, while others bizarrely insist that the original manuscripts of the Bible were written in English and reject anyone who claims otherwise. All of that is utter nonsense. I use the KJV because it's based on the Received Text, and I trust the Received Text far more than I trust the Critical Text. However, the KJV is not the only translation that's founded upon the Received Text; other translations that use it include the Geneva Bible, the Great Bible, Matthew's Bible, the Coverdale Bible, and the Tyndale Bible. Even if you side with the Received Text, there's absolutely no reason to be “KJV Only”. That is going much too far.

When you select a translation you are also selecting a philosophy. I want to make sure you understand exactly what choice you're making – because you *are* making a choice, whether you realize it or not.

I'd like to make one final point before we move on to the next subject. One common argument against the KJV is that it has been changed thousands of times. This argument is made so often

that you would imagine it was true, but it's actually very misleading.

It *is* true that there have been corrections made for printing errors, typographical changes, and spelling updates. The punctuation has also been updated. However, these changes were quite minor and *do not affect the actual translation*. Changing a word because it's spelled differently now than it was 400 years ago is not a big deal. Likewise, there's no reason for anyone to panic just because the rules of punctuation have changed over the past four centuries.

Dr. Donald Waite of Bible for Today compared the 1611 KJV with the 1917 KJV. Out of 791,328 words, he found only 1,095 changes that affected the way that the verses sound. The vast majority of these changes were minor – “towards” was changed to “toward”, “burnt” was changed to “burned”, etc. There were only 136 substantial changes, most of which were printer's errors that were corrected within 28 years of the KJV's original publication. Some of these 136 changes are:

1 Samuel 16:12 -- “requite good” changed to “requite me good”

Esther 1:8 -- “for the king” changed to “for so the king”

Isaiah 47:6 -- “the” changed to “thy”

Isaiah 49:13 -- “God” changed to “Lord”

Isaiah 57:8 “made a” changed to “made thee a”

Ezekiel 3:11 -- “the people” changed to “the children of thy people”

Nahum 3:17 -- “the crowned” changed to “thy crowned”

Acts 8:32 -- “shearer” changed to “his shearer”

Acts 16:1 -- “which was a Jew” changed to “which was a Jewess”

1 Peter 2:5 -- “sacrifice” changed to “sacrifices”

Jude 1:25 -- “now and ever” changed to “both now and ever”

So no, the KJV has *not* been changed thousands of times.
It is still the same as it was when it was released in 1611.

Heavenly Treasure

In this life people spend a great deal of time trying to get as many material possessions as they possibly can. This is a pretty universal trait for the entire human race. No matter how wealthy people are, they always seem to want even more. People who have thousands of dollars want millions of dollars. People who have millions want billions – and people who already have billions want billions more.

Now, some people respond to this by saying that Christians should take a vow of poverty. They claim that since Jesus was poor, we ought to be poor as well. They condemn the accumulation of material goods and teach that being rich is a sin. Wealth, they say, is bad. Christians just shouldn't live like that.

That all sounds very spiritual, but it's not Biblical. God gave Abraham an incredible amount of wealth – so much so that when Lot was carried away captive by an invading army, Abraham trained 318 of his servants in order to defeat the army and rescue his nephew (Genesis 14:14). You've got to be pretty well off if you have more than 300 servants! God also gave David an incredible amount of wealth – so much so that David donated *billions* of dollars worth of materials in order to build the Temple (1 Chronicles 29:1-5). God also gave Solomon a *staggering* amount of wealth – not because Solomon asked for it, but because God wanted to. God never chastised any of these people for being wealthy. *Having money is not a sin.*

Jesus had a lot to say about the subject of money, but He never condemned wealth. However, what He *did* say is quite startling. Jesus told us to **lay up our treasures in Heaven:**

Matthew 6:19-21: “Lay not up for yourself treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break

through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

There's a lot packed into in these verses, and I'd like to take some time to delve into them. First of all, notice that Jesus doesn't prohibit the accumulation of treasure. Jesus has no problem with people storing up wealth. He could easily have said “Don't you dare lay up treasure! That is a sin, and it's bad.” Instead He said something very different: He wants us to lay up our treasures in Heaven instead of Earth.

Now, this passage tends to get spiritualized quite a bit. People read it and assume that it's talking about spiritual blessings. They interpret these verses to mean something like this: “If I work for God then God will bless me spiritually.” That may sound plausible, but it's *not* what the verse means.

Stop and think about it for a moment. Jesus said if we store our treasures on Earth then they will be subject to decay and might be stolen. However, if we store them in Heaven then they cannot be stolen and will last forever. These statements make a lot of sense if they are talking about physical treasure, but they make *no sense at all* if they're talking about spiritual blessings. After all, it's *impossible* for moths to eat your spiritual blessings or for a thief to steal them!

Take a moment to think through the various spiritual blessings that God has given you. God has promised us eternal security in Christ. Can a moth eat that? God has promised to always be with us and to never forsake us. Can a thief steal that promise while we're away on vacation? Of course not! The only things that moths can eat and thieves can steal are *physical goods*. Christ is saying exactly what He seems to be saying: we should move our physical goods to Heaven so that they can't be stolen. In other words, God wants us to use Heaven like an *offshore bank account*.

I realize that sounds crazy, but that's because we have a very unbiblical view of Heaven. When many people think of Heaven they picture a big white place with lots of clouds and

harps, where people spend eternity strumming their harp and not really doing much else. That picture of Heaven is *not remotely Biblical*. The place that the Bible describes is completely different – and the Bible actually spends a lot of time describing it. God has far more to say about Heaven than we realize, and it's a real shame that we get most of our ideas about Heaven from Hollywood.

First of all, Heaven is not a vague place with clouds. The Bible tells us that *Heaven is actually a city*:

Hebrews 11:16: “But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.”

What has God prepared for us? *A city*. Notice that it doesn't say “a cloud”! We are *not* going to spend eternity floating on a cloud somewhere; instead we're going to spend it living *in a city*. The last two chapters of the Bible spend a lot of time describing this Heavenly city, which the Bible names “the New Jerusalem”. This incredibly large city has trees, streets, a stream, walls, food, and God Himself – to list just a few of the highlights!

Since God told us that we're going to spend eternity living in a city, that should give us a way to imagine what it's going to be like. After all, most people have spent their entire lives either living inside a city or near one! One of the things we know about cities is that they have places for people to live, and the New Jerusalem is no different. The Bible tells us exactly what we can expect as far as living accommodations go:

John 14:2: “In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.”

I realize that a lot of modern Bible translations have rendered this verse as “many rooms”, but I strongly disagree with

that translation. Jesus is not saying “When you get to Heaven I've got a spare closet that you can spend eternity living in.” That's ridiculous! The New Jerusalem is full of *homes*. It's an enormous city that covers more than *2 million square miles*. God is not hurting for space, and He doesn't have to stuff all of us into closets in order to make room for everyone. Do you seriously believe that your home on Earth, no matter how nice it may be, can even remotely compare to what God Himself has spent *two thousand years* preparing for you?

On top of that, I assure you that when you reach your heavenly home you aren't going to find a building that's completely empty. You aren't going to spend eternity wandering around an empty concrete shell, wishing that you had a chair to sit on. Houses are furnished on Earth and they will be furnished in Heaven. They will have *things* inside them. There's nothing wrong with this! Physical goods are not evil. If physical possessions were bad then Jesus wouldn't have urged you to accumulate them in Heaven!

So, then, in Heaven you will have a place to live, and your place to live will have possessions inside it. Jesus is telling you that you should take the possessions you have in this life and relocate them to Heaven so you will still have them once you get there. It's true that you can't take it with you, but you *can* send it up ahead.

Now, I'm not saying there's some magical way you can mail your baseball card collection to Heaven so you can have it in the ages to come. You can't take your favorite shirt and mail it to the New Jerusalem so you'll have it in the future. However, there *are* ways that you can use your Earthly possessions in order to lay up real, actual treasures in your Heavenly home!

Before we get to that, though, there's another issue we need to address. There are some people who claim that there's no such thing as treasure in Heaven because in Heaven everyone is equal and everyone has exactly the same thing. They reject the idea that some people in Heaven might have more than others, or that some people might have a higher status. This is a very

common belief, but it's not Biblical. In fact, I Corinthians 3 says quite the opposite:

I Corinthians 3:11-15: “For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire.”

This passage is clearly saying that every man's work will be tested, and anything that doesn't pass the test will be lost. A reward *will* be given to some people and will *not* be given to others. You see, ***God actually cares how we spend our lives***, and He will reward us accordingly. God isn't going to say “Bob spent his life faithfully serving me, while Fred spent his life lying drunk on the floor. I'm going to give them both the same reward because I don't care what they did with their time.” As the apostle Paul explains, Christians who wasted their lives will still be saved but they will suffer loss. They will attain eternal life but they will receive no reward. Those who faithfully served God, though, *will* be rewarded. The idea that “everyone will have the same thing” is just not Biblical.

If you want some further proof of that, take a look at what Jesus told His disciples:

Matthew 19:27-28: “Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore? And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you,

That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Who is going to judge the twelve tribes of Israel? The disciples. You aren't going to be sitting on one of those thrones, and I'm not either. That honor is reserved for them! In other words, Jesus gave the apostles something that *He's not going to give anyone else*. That alone destroys the idea that everyone in Heaven has the exact same position and rewards.

So just how *do* you lay up treasure in Heaven? One key way is to **give to the poor**:

Matthew 19:21: “Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.”

Luke 12:31-34: “But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you. Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Jesus is *very* clear about this: if you give to the poor then you *will* have treasure in Heaven. This is a guaranteed, ironclad way of transferring your wealth from this life into the next. If you give to the poor then God will give you “bags which wax not old”, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail.

Now, I'd like to point out once again that Christ describes this Heavenly treasure as something that's *real and tangible*. He talks about bags that don't wear out and goods that aren't eaten by moths. If Christ was talking about spiritual blessings then He easily could have said "Seek the kingdom of God and you will be drawn closer to God, which is your reward", but that's *not* what He said! Instead He talked as if this treasure was some type of physical good that would ordinarily be subject to the wear and tear of this life.

Another key way to amass Heavenly treasure is **to be persecuted for serving God**:

Matthew 5:11-12: "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."

Luke 6:22-23: "Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets."

If you are persecuted and suffer for the sake of Christ then you will be rewarded. In fact, your reward in Heaven will be *great!* Keep in mind that *Jesus*, the creator of the Universe, is the one who is saying "Yes, your reward will be truly astonishing." *God* is the one who is saying that your reward will be so amazing and mind-blowing that you should be leaping for joy! That should really grab our attention. Imagine a reward that's so large even *God* calls it "great"!

Another way to amass Heavenly treasure is to **receive the servants of God** as who they are, and by **helping others in the name of God**:

Matthew 10:40-42: “He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me. He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.”

This isn't as difficult as you might think. As the world becomes a darker place it will pressure us to distance ourselves from people who are God's faithful servants. The prophets in the Old Testament were hated: people despised them, refused to hear what they had to say, and executed them. Those who listened to the prophets and supported them were exposing themselves to persecution, and God promised to reward them. Likewise, when we stand by God's faithful servants and help them (instead of joining with the world to attack them), God will reward us.

God also rewards those who care about the needy and take care of them. The world is full of people who need help, and there's no shortage of opportunities to help them. If we are willing to act then there's a lot we can do.

At this point in the discussion there are some people who might stand up and complain that the very idea of rewards is unspiritual and bad. Some claim that even wanting a reward is a sign of immaturity. However, I'd like to point out that the person who commands us to want these rewards and get excited over them is actually *Jesus Himself* – and He said this not once, but *twice*. He *wants* us to be excited about what He's going to give us!

This really shouldn't surprise us. After all, how would you feel if you gave a present to someone and then found out they weren't excited about it and didn't want it in the first place? Isn't it much better when you give a gift that you *know* is wanted, and will be enjoyed and appreciated? Do you really want to give someone a gift just to hear them say “No thanks; I'm too spiritual to care about gifts”? Of course not! God doesn't want that either. God is going to give us something amazing, and He does *not* want us to spend our lives saying “No thanks; I don't want it.” That attitude doesn't honor God.

There is another class of rewards that we need to spend some time talking about. The Bible tells us that it's possible to earn certain types of crowns. These crowns are *not* crowns of authority but crowns of victory. The Bible refers to them as **incorruptible crowns**:

I Corinthians 9:24-27: “Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.”

As you can see, you have to *earn* these crowns. Some people will get them and some people won't. Paul urges us to run the race faithfully and discipline ourselves so that when we're judged we won't come away empty-handed. If you want an incorruptible crown then you're going to have to work for it. Despite what some people claim, God *does* put a difference between Christians who faithfully serve Christ and Christians who don't! Those who serve well will be rewarded, and those who

couldn't be bothered will not. The way that we live our lives *really does matter*.

One of the crowns that we can earn is the **crown of righteousness**:

2 Timothy 4:7-8: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth is laid up for me a **crown of righteousness**, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

This crown is an easy one to earn: all you have to do is long for the return of Christ. Those who eagerly want Jesus to come back will be given the crown of righteousness, and those who don't care or who are opposed to His return will forfeit this crown. It's that simple.

Sadly, there are many Christians in the world today who do *not* want Jesus to come back. They are actually terrified that Jesus might return at any minute and interrupt their lives. They want Jesus to stay away until they've finished their plans and have accomplished everything that they want to do. If God sent us a message saying that He would return at noon tomorrow, a great many Christians would be very upset because that would interrupt their plans. The things of the world have so ensnared many within the church that they the return of Christ as a serious problem.

That, however, is a terrible attitude to have! Imagine a bride telling her groom "No, I really don't want to marry you just yet. I've got a life to live and dreams to accomplish, and you are a big hindrance to all of that. You need to stay away until I've finished having my fun." No groom is going to be happy about hearing that – and Christ doesn't want to hear it from His Bride either. He wants us to long for His return and eagerly hope for it.

Think of it this way: is your life, dreams, and desires really more important than the *raising of the dead* and the

translation of all the saints into *incorruptible immortals*? I mean, *really*? You are more important than all of that? You want Christ to delay coming back and rescuing the Christians all over the world who are being *persecuted, tortured, and executed* just so you can finish your plans? You are so important than you want all those people to keep suffering just so that you aren't inconvenienced? If that is truly what you believe then you are very far from God.

Those who long for the return of Christ will receive the crown of righteousness. Those who do not long for His return will lose it.

Another type of crown is the **crown of life**:

James 1:12: “Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.”

Revelation 2:10: “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days; be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”

As we can see, the crown of life is given to those who *endure temptation*. Christ wants us to love Him, and the way we show our love for Him is by keeping His commandments (John 14:15). This means that those who keep His commandments prove that they really do love Him. Those who endure temptation and defeat it, choosing to walk in the ways of God instead of the ways of the flesh, will be given the crown of life. In other words, the way that you live your life *really matters*. It is not fine to keep living in sin! God wants us to be faithful *to death*. God really does put a difference between those who fight and overcome sin, and those who can't be bothered.

This crown is also the martyr's crown. Those who faithfully serve Christ and who choose death over abandoning Him will be given this crown. It is a reward for faithfulness.

Peter speaks of the third type of crown – the **crown of glory**:

I Peter 5:1-4: “The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.”

The only people who are eligible to receive this crown are pastors, evangelists, and elders. This crown is given to church leaders who faithfully and selflessly take care of their congregations. Those who were good examples, who preached the whole counsel of God, who took care of the flock, and who did so not for wealth but out of an earnest desire to help, will receive a crown of glory. On the other hand, those who were faithless, or who set a terrible example, or who preached heresy, or who abused the flock for their own gain, will lose this crown. Once again we see that faithfulness is rewarded.

Some people will receive these crowns while others will go away empty-handed. Jesus Himself said that we must be careful because these crowns *can* be lost:

Revelation 3:11: “Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.”

Now, our *salvation* cannot be lost and *eternal life* cannot be lost, so Christ isn't talking about either of those. What *can* be lost are our crowns, because they are rewards for a life well-lived. Incidentally, this puts crowns in a bit of a different category from other Heavenly treasure. If you give to the poor then God will reward you, and that reward *cannot* be lost. Crowns, though, are trickier to earn because they can only be earned by a lifetime of faithful service. They are harder to obtain, and I suspect that many people will go away empty-handed.

I realize that the idea of being rewarded for our service makes some people uncomfortable, but *this is Christ's idea*, not our own. God is *not* doing something wrong by generously rewarding His people! We also need to keep in mind what people in Heaven are actually going to do with these rewards. While we are on Earth we can earn rewards by faithfully serving God. Once we are in Heaven, we will take our rewards and use them to bring glory and honor to God:

Revelation 4:9-11: “And when those beasts give glory and honor and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth forever and ever, The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.”

What are people doing with their crowns? They are casting them before the throne of God and worshiping Him. The Lord had glorified them, and they have used their glory to worship the Father. Do you see how it works?

God wants us to use the possessions that He has given us to honor Him. When we do that – when we give to the poor, help others in the name of Christ, and suffer for His name – then God

has promised to reward us. When we get to Heaven and receive the rewards that God chose to give us, we will take them and use them to glorify God – which is how we got them in the first place.

So, spend your life serving God. Lay up rewards in Heaven. Provide for yourself bags that don't wax old, and an incorruptible crown that doesn't fade away. Then, when the day comes, you can honor the Lord and glorify Him with all the things He has given you. You might say that the reason God rewards us is so that we can use that reward to glorify Him! Of course, you have to have a reward in order to do that. After all, you can't cast your crown before His throne if you don't have a crown in the first place!

New Revelation

Have you noticed that many Christians claim to have received direct, divine revelation from God Himself? It's become very common for Christians to claim that God told them to do whatever it is they're doing. People say things like "God told me to preach this message" or "God told me to phone that person" or "God told me to make that decision". In each case people claim that they were *not* acting of their own accord. Instead God Himself ordered them to do whatever it was they did. They were acting under Divine Command.

This phenomenon greatly disturbs me because it's completely unbiblical. Whenever someone begins a sentence with "God told me..." I inwardly wince. Stop and think about it for a minute. As soon as someone claims that they're acting under the direct command of God, they make themselves unaccountable and it becomes impossible to criticize them. After all, it wasn't *their* idea; they were just doing what God told them to do! God told them to jump, so they jumped. You can't even have a discussion about it because any criticism of their actions becomes criticism of God. After all, if God told them to do it then who are you to question God?

However, does God actually speak to people in that manner? Does God *really* talk to people and send them Divine messages telling them what to do and when to do it? I am convinced that the answer is a resounding *no*. In this era of history God does *not* speak to us directly. He may use our consciences to convict us and He may use those around us to remind us of the truth, but God is no longer in the business of talking directly to His people. Instead He has given us the Bible, and He expects us to learn what it has to say and apply it to our lives. God wants us to guide our lives *by the Bible*.

You see, the Bible tells us that it is all the divine revelation that we need:

2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All scripture is given by

inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

This passage says that the Scriptures have been given to us so that we can be perfect. It tells us that the material it contains within its pages is enough to *thoroughly* furnish us for *all* good works. In other words, there are no good works that are outside its scope. The Bible claims that it has 100% of the divine revelation that we need in order to live our lives. No other revelation is necessary! This means *we don't need extra messages from God in order to do God's will, because God has already told us everything that we need to know.*

Now, the Bible's claim to be sufficient is either true or false. If it's true then we don't need a "personal word from God". We don't need God to speak to us because the Bible already contains everything that we need to know. It means that God has *already* spoken, and all we need to do is read the Word that He has given to us.

However, if God *does* speak to His people today then 2 Timothy 3:17 is a lie. It means that the Bible is *not* enough and we need additional information that God failed to supply. It means that the Bible doesn't fully equip us for life but instead leaves us unprepared for many situations, and our only hope is for God to speak to us directly and fill in the critical information that He left out of the Bible. Since this train of thought is clearly wrong (because every word in the Bible is true, including 2 Timothy 3:16-17), that means *there are no such things as personal words from God.*

But isn't it true that God used to speak directly to His people? Didn't God speak to men through dreams, angels, and so forth all throughout the Old Testament? Yes He did, but the Bible tells us that He no longer does that. His method of speaking to us has changed:

Hebrews 1:1-2: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds;"

Things are different now. In the past, before the Bible was completed, God spoke to mankind in many different ways. However, in this age God only speaks to us through His Son Jesus Christ – and Christ's teachings can be found written in the New Testament. The Bible that God gave to us is complete. He didn't leave anything out that we need.

I realize that people think that God has always led His people by speaking directly to them, but that isn't the case. The truth is that very few people in the Bible were *ever* spoken to by God! According to Dr. Sam Kurien:

"The only individuals who heard from God more than twice in the Old Testament are Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jacob, Aaron, Joshua, David and Solomon. These eight and no more!"

Think about what that means! People commonly assume that God has always talked to His people to tell them what to do whenever they were faced with a decision, but that's not true. Even in the Old Testament it was extremely rare to hear from God. The Lord simply did *not* communicate with His people on a regular basis in order to guide them through life's decisions. There are large numbers of prominent Bible characters who never heard from God *even one time*, as Gary Gilley points out:

"Below are some of the important characters found in the Old Testament who never heard directly from God as far as we know: Caleb,

Esther, Mordecai, Ruth, Joab, Hezekiah, Josiah, Jehoshapat, Jonathan, most of the judges, Ezra, Nehemiah, Shadrack, Meshach and Abd-nego (although they may have been comforted by the Son in the fire). In addition whole categories of key leaders never heard from God personally, including none of Jacob's sons except Joseph, none of the kings of Judah after Solomon, none of the judges except for Gideon, none of the returning exiles and none of David's mighty men or military leaders. This is just a sampling; many more could be cited." (Gary Gilley)

On top of that, when God did speak He *never* spoke through an "impression" or "feeling". As Dr. Sam Kurien pointed out:

"When God spoke, it was in an audible voice, or on occasions through a vision or dream. There is not a single instance of God speaking to the mind or heart inaudibly through an inner voice."

People today like to say that "God spoke to my heart", but *nowhere in the entire Bible does God ever speak to anyone in that manner*. There is zero Biblical evidence that God communicates that way. It's true that the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin and helps us understand the Scriptures, but even the Spirit is never depicted as whispering to a person's heart. There isn't a single case of that happening anywhere in the Bible.

Moreover, when God did speak He talked about big-picture issues, not personal life decisions:

"When God did speak in Scripture it almost always dealt with the big picture of what God was doing in the outworking of His redemption program or the life of His people in general. You

will search in vain to find God telling people what job to take, how many donkeys to buy, or what land to purchase — except as it was related to the bigger issue of God’s dealings with His people.” (Gary Gilley)

Today people believe that when they're faced with a decision they can ask God what to do and God will personally tell them what choice is right. The problem with this idea is that the Bible doesn't support it. That type of divine advice is exceedingly rare in the Bible. There were a couple men (like King David) who had the ability to inquire of God, but few people ever had that privilege, and those who did only used it in the most extreme circumstances. It has *never* been the ordinary course of action for the average believer!

You simply won't find any verses in the Old or New Testament that say “When you are faced with a decision, ask God about it and He will divinely impress the correct decision upon your heart.” Nor will you find any verses that say “Sometimes God will impress an action on your heart, and when God does that you should obey immediately.” I realize how common these two beliefs are, but they are not Biblical. It's true that God guides us, but He speaks to us through His Word, *not* through “impressions” or direct revelation. It's true that God shapes our lives, but He does that by His divine providence – the same power He uses to raise up nations and cast them down. God is *not* sitting in Heaven hoping that you will make the right decision so that His plans will work!

Some might say, weren't there times in the Bible when God guided the lives of the apostles? Yes, there are – and in each case He did so through angels or supernatural revelation, *not* through speaking to their heart:

“...all of the examples which are selected to support individual guidance are clearly instances of *supernatural revelation*. In the book

of Acts, such guidance came through visions (Acts 9:10-16; 10:3-8; 10:17; 16:9-10; 18:9; 22:17-21), angelic messenger (Acts 8:26; 12:7-8; 27:23), physical miracle (Acts 8:39), an audible voice from God (8:29; 9:3-6; 10:19-20; 23:11) or a prophet who had received direct revelation (Acts 21:10-11). Are there other recorded examples where detailed guidance was given through some means other than supernatural revelation? No. . .

“At no point in Scripture do we read of a believer asking, “What is God's individual will for me in this matter?” Much of the terminology found in presentations of the traditional view is absent, either in vocabulary or on concept, from the pages of the Bible. One does not read of the “specific will,” “center of God's will,” “right decision,” “putting out a fleece,” or even “finding God's will.”

“But even more startling is the fact that no decision is ever explained on the basis that it was “God's individual will.” Today we commonly hear people say, “I did thus and such because I knew it was God's will for me.” Or, “I felt in my heart God wanted me to do it.” The apostles often gave reasons for their decisions, but never in such terms.” (Garry Friesen, *Decision Making and The Will of God*, p. 91-92)

Many people believe that God has an individual will for their lives, and it's up to them to seek that will and figure out what God wants them to do. Does God want them to go into this profession, or that one? What house does God want them to buy? What car does God want them to own? People pray about it, get

an impression in their mind, and assume that their impression is God's command for their life.

Yet people ignore the fact that *no one in the entire Bible ever lived their life that way*. Gideon's fleece was a real, actual fleece and a real, actual supernatural miracle. The still small voice that spoke to Elijah was an actual, audible voice, not an “impression” or “feeling”. Even in those miraculous cases there's no evidence that either of them spent the rest of their lives living out that example! Gideon didn't spend his life putting out more fleeces. No person in the Bible ever sought a divine word from God for every decision that they faced in life – and the reason is because *that's not how God works*. Instead God gave us His Word and He wants us to live by its principles. Sadly, the modern generation has decided that the Bible isn't enough for them. They want God to whisper the right decision to their heart – even though God never promised to do that. God guides our life by His power, His providence, and His Word – *not* by “impressions” or “feelings”.

But, you might say, isn't all of this negated by the fact that these “personal words” really do exist? After all, God really does speak to people and tell them to do things! People pray for guidance and then they suddenly know what to do. Sometimes people get the urge to call someone, and lo and behold something good comes of it. Isn't that proof that God really does speak to His children today?

I'm afraid not. You see, there's an *enormous* difference between “I suddenly knew what to do” and “God Himself told me which choice was right”. Likewise, there's a big leap between “I heard a voice” and “That voice was definitely God”. In each case *you* are deciding that the voice must be from God. You are ruling out the notion that it might have been your own idea, and the reason you are ruling it out is because of *your belief* that God talks directly to His children. Therefore, if you ask God what to do and you suddenly think of something, your belief leads you to conclude that whatever you just thought of must have come from God. *But that is not the only possible explanation.*

There's an easy way to prove that these “impressions” do not come from God. You see, God cannot lie and *God cannot be wrong*. Whenever God speaks He speaks authoritatively. In fact, the way prophets were tested in the Bible was by evaluating the outcome of their predictions. If they ever got *anything* wrong then they were false prophets, and God demanded that they be put to death for lying:

Deuteronomy 18:20-22: "But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him."

That is how serious it was to claim that God spoke to you! People who stood up and said “This is what God told me” were literally putting their very life on the line. If anyone ever claimed to be speaking for God when God hadn't actually spoken to them, *God commanded that they be executed*. This means whenever you stand up and say that God has told you something when it wasn't God at all, you are committing a very serious sin. You may take it lightly, but *God does not*. It is very serious to say “God told me”!

It's even worse when you realize that there's no record of God ever talking to someone through “impressions” or “feelings”. People who say “God told me” have invented an entirely new method of divine revelation that has no Biblical support whatsoever. That is a very dangerous thing to do! If you are wrong and that inner voice isn't actually God then you have a problem.

So what about these “impressions” – are they 100% accurate 100% of the time? Absolutely not! Sometimes they work out and sometimes they don't. When something good happens people use that as proof that it was from God, but when things go terribly wrong they say that they “misunderstood” – or they blame God for giving them bad advice! On top of that, there are times when one person claims the Holy Spirit told them one thing while another person claims the opposite. Is God divided? Do you really think that God is so confused that He can't even figure out His own will for people? Of course not! The truth is that God isn't speaking to anyone. He doesn't do that anymore *because He wants us to live by the Bible.*

Let's suppose that you had a very strong impression that God told you something. If that thing didn't come to pass or proved to be a terrible mistake, you would assume that the word wasn't from God at all. However, if it *did* come to pass then you would be sure that God had spoken to you. This creates a situation where people ignore all the times these “personal words” fail, and emphasize the times that they came to pass – but that's like gambling and only counting the times that you win. Since these “impressions” cannot be trusted 100% of the time, and since the impressions encourage us to look outside the Bible for revelation from God, that means these “personal words” cannot possibly be from God (even if some of them seem to come true). A prophet that had that kind of track record in the Bible was labeled a false prophet for the serious crime of claiming that God said something *when God had not said anything at all.* Putting words in God's mouth is *that serious* to God!

The Bible has a lot of negative things to say about these “personal words from God”. It says that the Scriptures are all we need in order to thoroughly furnish us for all good works. It says that we don't need *any* other revelation. It says that God has stopped speaking to people through dreams and visions and direct revelation. It says that very few people in all of history have ever heard directly from God Himself, and that God has *never* talked to *anyone* by impressing something upon their mind. It also says

that anything that isn't 100% accurate 100% of the time is not the voice of God. It's not enough to have one example of an impression that seemed to come true. God never speaks in a method that's accurate sometimes but in other cases provides very wrong information! He is accurate *all of the time* – and that is not the case for these “personal words”.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that the Bible can be trusted, and it is all that we need. There is no need to look elsewhere for divine revelation, or to trust anything that we don't find in the Scriptures. God hasn't left out anything that we need to have. If “personal words” exist then God is actually saying that the Scriptures are insufficient and have important gaps that need to be filled. It means that the Bible isn't finished at all, but is a work in progress that's being constantly enlarged. After all, it's impossible for Jesus to speak with anything less than absolute authority! If Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, told someone something then whatever He said is absolute truth and we should add it to our Bibles. If Jesus gave someone a tour of Heaven and revealed all kinds of new information about it (which I do *not* believe actually happens) then we should add a new book to the Scriptures. After all, Jesus has spoken and every one of His words is flawless. It means that we should be busy collecting all of this new revelation and adding it to our Bibles so that everyone can know what *else* Jesus had to say.

I realize that line of reasoning is ridiculous, but that's exactly where belief in “personal words from God” leads. The Bible simply doesn't support the idea that it is an open book that can be added to as the need arises. After all, we're told that we should contend for the faith that was *once* delivered to the saints:

Jude 1:3: "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was **once** delivered unto the saints."

You can search your Bible from cover to cover and you will never find any verse that says “The Scripture is a work in progress. God is going to add a lot more to this as time goes on, so stay tuned!” The Bible is a closed book. You cannot add a Book of Mormon, or a Book of Tours of Heaven, or a Book of Things That Jesus Revealed To Me. I realize how popular the “God gave me a tour of Heaven” genre is, but that constitutes *new revelation from God*, and God isn't in the business of giving people new revelation.

This is how one person put it:

“The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture does not imply that God cannot add any more words to those he has already spoken to his people. It rather implies that man cannot add on his own initiative any words to those that God has already spoken. Furthermore, it implies that in fact God has not spoken to mankind any more words which he requires us to believe or obey other than those which we have now in the Bible.” (Grudem)

Does this mean that God will never speak to His people again? Of course not. But it does mean that for now, in this era and in this life, the Bible is all that we need. When we seek a “personal word from God” we're telling God that His Word isn't enough – that God omitted important information that we can't live without. We are telling Him that His Word doesn't equip us for all good works and we need something more in order to get by. That doesn't honor God or His Word. (Can we pray for wisdom? Absolutely. Will God give us wisdom if we pray for it? Certainly! But that is *entirely different* from asking God to tell us new things that are not written in His Word. Praying for wisdom and understanding is entirely different from praying for new divine revelation from God.)

The Bible is all that God has given to us, and it really is all

that we need.

Worship

It's pretty universal for churches refer to their Sunday morning services as "Worship services". I have to ask, though: are they really *worship* services? I'm not convinced that the church actually understands what the word "worship" really means.

We can find the word "worship" many times throughout the Bible. For example, the wise men worshiped Jesus:

Matthew 2:11: "And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him; and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh."

Does this mean the wise men sang Jesus some songs and then listened to a sermon? Nope. It means they literally bowed down to Him.

Here's a time when a leper came to Jesus:

Matthew 8:2: "And, behold, there came a leper and worshipped him, saying, Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean."

Did this leper sing a song to Jesus? No. He literally bowed down at His feet and then asked to be cured of his leprosy.

Here's a time when the disciples worshiped Jesus:

Matthew 14:31-33: "And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased. Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him,

saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.”

Did the disciples sing to Jesus? No. They bowed down at His feet in awe and amazement.

I could give a *lot* more examples, but I think you get the point. The Bible is extremely consistent in the way it uses the word “worship”. That word does *not* mean to sing songs! We already have a word for that, and it is the word “praise”. The word “worship” means to bow down to God.

When people gather together and sing hymns, are they worshipping Jesus? No, they are praising Him. Worship and praise are not the same! We worship Jesus when we bow down before Him. We worship Him when we do His will instead of our own. You will never find a “worship service” mentioned anywhere in the Bible. There are many times when people gather together to praise the Lord or listen to a sermon, but worship is something that each individual must do by themselves. It's not a group activity! You must make the choice to walk in His ways instead of your own. You must choose to submit to Him in your life instead of doing whatever you please. Those are acts of worship! What happens in Sunday morning services are acts of *praise*, which is a group activity.

It's very easy to praise God without worshipping Him. In fact, God said that people do this all the time:

Isaiah 29:13: “Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:”

Can you honor God with your lips while your heart is far from Him? Absolutely. I think that's very common in churches. Praise and worship are not the same thing, and churches shouldn't act like they're synonyms. If you come to church and sing a few

praise songs, that doesn't mean that you've engaged in an act of worship. If you truly want to worship Jesus then you must submit to Him in your life and bow down to Him.

Churches should teach people what the word “worship” really means. We aren't doing people any favors by confusing the terms “worship” and “praise”! Churches do *not* have a “worship team”. That whole concept doesn't even make sense! What churches have is a *praise* team. The fact that the word “worship” is so widely misused makes me think that people don't understand what worship is in the first place.

Should people praise God? Yes. Should people worship God? Yes. Are those two things the same? No, they are not.

The Sabbath

Many people believe that the Bible commands Christians to not work on Sunday. However, is that actually the case? Does God really require believers to set aside Sunday as a day of rest?

In order to answer that question we need to know a little bit more about the Sabbath. When the Israelites were encamped at Mount Sinai, the Lord commanded them to honor the Sabbath day:

Exodus 20:8-11: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.”

The first thing I want to point out is that the Sabbath day was the *seventh* day of the week. God was very clear about this: the reason He “hallowed” the *last* day of the week was because He created the entire world in six days and then rested on the seventh day. This means that the Sabbath is Saturday, not Sunday. *There has never been a commandment to rest on the first day of the week!* This means that the act of resting on the first day of the week has nothing whatsoever to do with this commandment. As Christians we don't have liberty to take God's commands and say “Well, we'll just honor a different day of the week and call it the same thing”. There are no verses in the Bible that say the Sabbath was somehow changed or moved to a different day of the week!

The reason that Christians gathered on Sunday to worship was to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, who rose from the dead

on the first day of the week. It had nothing to do with keeping the Sabbath.

But that's not all! If you read through the book of Exodus you will discover that this commandment was given as a sign between God and the Israelites. In other words, this commandment was specific to *the Jews*. Like circumcision, it never applied to Gentiles. That is made clear in this passage:

Exodus 30:13-17: “Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you. Ye shall keep the sabbath therefor; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel forever: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.”

In this passage the Lord said *three times* that this commandment applied *to the children of Israel*. This was *not* said about the commandment to honor your parents, or not murder, or not commit adultery, or not steal. It would have been easy for the Lord to say that this command applied to everyone, but that's not what He said! Instead He made it clear that this only applied *to the Jews*.

The commandment was also extremely strict. Anyone who did any work at all on the seventh day of the week (which would be our Saturday, *not* our Sunday) was to be put to death. In other passages the Bible elaborated on what was meant by not being allowed to work:

Jeremiah 17:21-22: “Thus saith the Lord; Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem; Neither carry forth a burden out of your houses on the sabbath day, neither do ye any work, but hallow ye the sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers.”

As you can see, the Lord commanded the Israelites to not bear any burdens on the Sabbath. They weren't allowed to go about their normal business, or carry things into the city, or even carry things out of their house. In another passage the Bible went into even more detail:

Exodus 35:3: “Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the sabbath day.”

Notice that no exception is made for winter weather! The Jews weren't even allowed to *start a fire* in their homes on the Sabbath. Even gathering sticks on the Sabbath was punishable by death:

Numbers 15:32-36: “And while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man that gathered sticks upon the sabbath day. And they that found him gathering sticks brought him unto Moses and Aaron, and unto all the congregation. And they put in in ward, because it was not declared what should be done to him. And the Lord said unto Moses, The man shall be

surely put to death: all the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp. And all the congregation brought him without the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died; as the Lord commanded Moses.”

Simply put, you were not allowed to do *any* kind of work *whatsoever* on the Sabbath.

It's true that in the New Testament Jesus explained that this commandment wasn't intended to prevent people from helping one another. The Lord healed people on the Sabbath, which angered the Pharisees a great deal. But any kind of work at all – even something as mundane as starting a fire – was strictly prohibited by the Mosaic Law on pain of death.

People today don't even come close to keeping this commandment! Not only do they rest on the wrong day (typically Saturday is very busy day filled with work!), but when they do rest they perform all kinds of activities that would have gotten them *executed* in Old Testament times.

It's worth remembering that this commandment says nothing about worship services, or going to the temple, or anything of that nature. This wasn't a time when the Israelites set aside what they were doing so they could go to the temple and offer sacrifices. Over and over the Lord said that He wanted the Jews to keep this day holy *by not working*. They did *not* keep it holy by singing hymns or listening to priests!

On top of that, the Sabbath wasn't the only holy day in the Jewish calendar. Leviticus 23 gives an entire list of days that the Jews were commanded to keep holy. The Sabbath is simply the one that we're the most familiar with. The Jews were required to keep *all* of the various holy days on their calendar! As Gentiles we are required to keep *none* of them.

If you search the New Testament you'll find that many of the Ten Commandments were repeated and applied to the church. However, one commandment that was *not* given to the church was the command to keep the Sabbath day holy. Instead the New

Testament teaches that the Sabbath doesn't apply to us anymore:

Colossians 2:16-17: “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.”

These verses state that we aren't to judge one another on the basis of whether we honor the Jewish holy days or Sabbath days. In other words, *it's left up to our discretion*. If we want to celebrate the various Jewish holy days (of which the Sabbath is just one!) then we can, but if we don't then that's fine as well. This is very different from executing someone for gathering sticks! In case we missed the point, the same idea can be found in Romans:

Romans 14:5: “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

6 He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and give God thanks.

...

10 But why doest thou judge thy brother? Or why dost thou set at naught thy brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.”

Instead of teaching that Christians must not work on Saturday, these verses say that Christians have liberty to do as they think best. If they want to abstain from eating meat then they may do so; if they want to eat meat then that's fine as well. If one

man wants to keep the entire Jewish calendar of holy days (which involves more than just Saturday!) then that's fine; if another man doesn't want to keep any of them then that's equally fine. That is *not at all* what you would expect the Scriptures to say if working on the Sabbath was a serious sin. There are no passages that give the church that same kind of discretion when it comes to stealing, coveting, committing adultery, and so forth. All of those commands are still binding – but the one to honor the Sabbath day is not.

As a final note, some people point out that Jesus kept the Sabbath, and that's quite true. However, Jesus also kept the *entire Mosaic Law*. The reason He did that is because He was under that Law and was required to keep it. The Mosaic Law didn't pass away until after He was crucified. If the New Testament church was required to keep the Sabbath then that would have been mentioned somewhere in the epistles to the churches. However, what we actually find is something entirely different. The church is *not* required to keep the Jewish holy days!

In summary, the law to keep the Sabbath was given only to the Jews and was never applied to the Gentiles. As Christians we are not required to keep Saturday holy by not working on that day. God has given us liberty to decide whether or not we want to keep the Jewish calendar of holy days. If we wish to keep them then we may do so, but if we don't then it's not a sin. What the Bible *does* say is that we shouldn't judge each other on the basis of Sabbath keeping.

If you do decide to set apart Sunday as a day of rest, then that's perfectly fine – but don't say that you're “keeping the Sabbath holy”. What you're doing isn't related to that commandment in any way, because that commandment was for *Saturday*, not Sunday. You can't change the Law and then pretend that you're keeping it! The only person who can change that commandment is God. That Law doesn't apply to the church, and God didn't move the Sabbath to a different day of the week.

Conclusion

If you've made it this far then it should be obvious by now why I think the modern church is very unbiblical. I'm not saying that the *doctrines* of churches are unbiblical (although that may be true as well, depending on what denomination we're talking about). I am saying that the way people “do church” is completely unbiblical. Christians often say that the Bible is their sole guide for faith and practice, and claim that they want to obey the Bible and not go beyond it – but when it comes to the way we run our churches, we've tossed the Bible out completely and have come up with all sorts of traditions that have no Biblical support and cannot be justified. Our ways are *not* better than God's ways. The way we have come up with to “do church” is extremely ineffective and has had terrible consequences.

Is there any Biblical support for having church buildings? Nope. But we have them anyway, and we spend millions of dollars on them, and we go deep into debt to pay for them, and we ask the congregation to make huge sacrifices in order to fund them. These buildings are always growing larger and larger, and taking more time and resources to maintain and repair. The buildings are a huge burden and have lead to a lot of other problems, but we want them anyway. If we met in people's homes, like *every church we find in the New Testament*, we would solve a whole host of problems. But that's not what we do.

Is there any Biblical support for a pastor to have a congregation of ten thousand people? Absolutely not. The whole job of a pastor is to know his sheep, and help them, and go after them when they're in trouble – but it's possible to attend a large church for *months* without the pastor even noticing you're there. If you want help from the church you're going to have to get in touch with someone yourself and make an appointment, and then possibly pay a fee for counseling services. The pastor doesn't know who you are and doesn't have time for you, and he isn't going to think about you when crafting his sermons. He has thousands of people that he's preaching to, and he can't possibly

deal with each person individually and work alongside them. This wouldn't be a problem if people met in small groups in their homes, but that's not the way we do things.

Is there any Biblical support for pastors delivering every single sermon as a monologue that must never be interrupted with questions or corrections? Nope. Some sermons in the Bible were long and others were short, but people were allowed to ask questions. Paul even told people to judge those who were speaking and correct them if they were wrong. In the modern church a pastor picks a sermon and preaches it to 3000 people in the hope that somehow there might be something in it for someone. If we had small home churches then the messages could actually be directed at the problems people were struggling with. People could ask questions and get clarification. They could actually learn something, instead of being lectured and then sent home to work out any problems on their own.

Is there any Biblical support for services being exactly an hour or two long? Nope. In the Bible services were as long as they needed to be. People gathered together and then remained together until they were done. They prayed as long as needed, and preached as long as needed, and talked as long as needed. Sometimes the service only lasted a few minutes and sometimes it lasted all night. The length didn't really matter. Is that how we do things? Absolutely not. Our services are planned out in advance, right down to every song that will be sung and every prayer that will be prayed and the exact list of points the pastor will make in his sermon. The service will start exactly on time and end exactly on time (with very little variation). The service is going to be exactly the same regardless of who shows up that day or what their needs are. The number of people who come (or don't come) has no impact on how the service unfolds at all. There's no Biblical support for that, and no church in the Bible ever operated that way, but that's the way we do things today.

I could go on and on and on. Is there Biblical support for tithing? No. Is there Biblical support for pastors marrying people? No. Is there Biblical support for meeting exactly once a week on

Sunday mornings? No. Is there Biblical support for voting in pastors and voting them out? No. Is there Biblical support for having the entire congregation sit passively during the service? No. Is there Biblical support for pastors switching jobs again and again until they reach the peak of their career and land a prestigious position at a megachurch? No. Is there Biblical support for separating children from their parents once the service starts, and dividing people into different age groups so they can all be taught separately? No. Is there Biblical support for opening up church services to people who aren't Christians at all, and never having any services or events that are only for believers? Nope. There's not even any Biblical support for calling part of the church building "the sanctuary" and designating it as a holy place (which is how many people view it). The building isn't "the church"! The *people* are the church. God doesn't dwell in the building; instead the Holy Spirit dwells within us. The sanctuary is not holy! Instead it is the *people* who are holy.

Yes, this land is full of buildings that are called churches. They have pastors that don't know the people who attend the services, because there are so many people attending that the pastor can't possibly get to know them. You can go into these buildings and attend the services, but you can't expect people to know when you're in trouble because it doesn't work that way. The pastor is probably not going to come looking for you if something bad happens, but if you fill out a form and schedule an appointment then maybe you can get some counseling (although you may be charged for it). You can hear sermons in these buildings, but the sermons aren't designed with you in mind and may have nothing to do with what's going on in your life. If you've been going to church for a while then all the sermons will probably be things you've heard before. If you've been going a long time then you could probably give the sermon yourself because you already know all the points that are going to be made. You're essentially stuck in first grade forever because the pastor will never explore the Bible on a deeper level. He can't, because his church is full of people who aren't saved or who don't

really care very much about Christianity.

If you go to a church service, you will be able to say hello to the person who has been sitting behind you for the past three years – but that will probably be the extent of your conversation. You will sing whatever songs you are told to sing, and you will pray whatever you are told to pray. If there's a responsive reading then you will say whatever the pastor wants you to say. You can give when the offering plate is passed around, and nearly all your money will go toward paying for the building and the salaries of the staff (some of whom may make significantly more money than you do). You can then sit quietly while the pastor preaches at you. Once the service is over and you've finally left the building you can then pray your own prayers and sing your own praises to God. You can study the Bible and have friends over and build relationships with them. You can talk to someone about your problems and help them with theirs. You can bear one another's burdens – but you're going to be doing it outside of the very expensive church building, because that's not what that building is for.

I've heard it said that fewer people go to church these days than they did in the past. What amazes me is that anyone goes to church at all! Why would you want to drive across town in order to sit passively for a few hours and then drive back home? How does that benefit anyone? If you go to a small group then you can help others and be helped in return, but you have no options to do anything in a church service. If you miss church for a month it won't negatively impact the service at all, because there's nothing for you to do in the service but sit there quietly.

That might not be so bad if there was Biblical support for the way we conduct our services, *but there isn't*. In the Bible, services were held by small groups of people who met in homes. Christians talked to one another, and asked questions, and corrected one another, and helped one another. They noticed when there were problems and they went after the lost. They met frequently (on a daily basis, actually), they shared meals together all the time, and they were actively involved in each other's lives.

Are there congregations that manage to get to know each other and become close to one another in spite of all this? Sure – but that is happening *in spite* of the way they conduct their services, not because of them. The service is designed to keep everyone passive, and it does a really good job of that. The only thing people are asked to do is stand when they're told to stand, sit when they're told to sit, sing when they are told to sing, and be quiet when they're told to be quiet. You don't have to do anything in a service at all! In fact, you *can't*. The paid staff will handle it all for you. Your presence at the service is not going to make it better, and your absence will not make it worse. (Was that true in New Testament churches? Definitely not. But that's exactly how our services are designed to work.)

Is there Biblical support for that model? Nope – not even close. So why are churches structured this way? *Because that's what people want*. The modern church is governed by the congregation. They have the power to vote in deacons, elders, and pastors, and to vote them right back out again. If the people didn't like the way things were being done then they could change it – but they don't. The truth is that the modern church has a lot of aspects that appeal to the flesh. After all, no one is going to expect anything from you and you're not going to be asked to do anything. The services are going to be kept short, and you will know exactly when you're going to be leaving. You don't have to establish close relationships with anyone or open up about your problems. You can keep living in sin all you want, and the chances are no one around you will even notice. The sermons are never going to challenge you, which means you don't have to worry about studying the Bible and making sure you know what's going on. All of the work will be done by other people, which gives you the freedom to sit there quietly and vegetate. You're also not going to be held accountable for anything! If the church does somehow get a pastor who's a real firebrand, they can just vote him out and replace him. The church will carefully insulate you from anything unpleasant and make sure you don't hear anything that you don't want to hear. If you don't have a passion

for God and want to remain in your sins then the modern church is a dream come true.

It's also a great system for pastors. They get a large building, and a large ministry, and a large staff, and lot of resources to play with. I realize there are a lot of small churches that claim to not have very much money, but even “small” churches often have budgets of *hundreds of thousands of dollars per year* (which is probably *far more* than the budget of anyone in the congregation). Besides, there's always the dream of “striking it big” – and if a pastor realizes that his church isn't going to grow then he can just jump ship to a bigger one. No pastor is going to want to have a small house church when he could have a multi-million-dollar complex with a large full-time staff! There's no prestige in a small house church at all. No one is going to be impressed by a congregation of 15 people. It's true that small class sizes are *enormously* beneficial for *the people who are actually in those classes*, but I think it's safe to say that spiritual growth is pretty far down on the list of priorities for most churches. (I know that seems harsh, so here's a question for you. Which do you think is more helpful for spiritual growth: allowing questions during a service, or refusing them? Even *schools* allow students to ask questions, because it's so obvious that it helps people understand the material – but not churches. What does that tell you about our priorities?)

The modern church is exactly the way that people want it to be. The problem is that *it's not the way God wants it to be*. The Lord has given us a pattern to follow in His Word, and He expects us to follow it. He's told us exactly how He wants the church to operate. Jesus has also told us what He will do if the church ignores Him and does whatever they want instead:

Revelation 2:4-5: “Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and

will remove thy candlestick out of his place,
except thou repent.”

What did Jesus say He would do if the church didn't repent? He said He would remove it from His presence and cast it aside. Oh, the building might remain and the people might still show up, but from God's perspective it would no longer be a church at all. It would just be a group of people who were wasting their time doing things that God hated.

God commands us to walk in His ways. When are we going to stop and think about what we're doing and compare it to what the Bible has to say? If our traditions and ways of doing things have no Biblical basis then shouldn't we do something about that? Why are we fighting so hard to keep our church buildings when, honestly, we probably shouldn't have them in the first place? Why are we fighting so hard to make sure a church service is attended by 1500 people, when those people would be far better served if they were in a small group of only 15 people? Are we *really* serving God? Do we truly have the best interests of the congregation at heart?

I realize we have a lot of impressive buildings. There was once a time when the disciples tried to show Jesus how impressive Herod's temple was. Do you know what He had to say about that magnificent building which, at the time, was one of the greatest structures in the world?

Mark 13:1-2: “And as he went out of the temple, one of his disciples saith unto him, Master, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here! And Jesus answering said unto him, Seest thou these great buildings? there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.”

Do you think that God would have used the Romans to tear that temple apart stone from stone if that building was

pleasing in His sight and a true house of prayer? I'm pretty sure the answer is *no*. God tore that temple apart because it was a den of thieves.

There may come a day when the government comes against our church buildings and tears them down. If that happens, I have to ask: is it possible that God is allowing the government to shut down the church because it stopped pleasing Him a long time ago? If our churches were firmly based on the Bible then that would be one thing – but are they? There are many people today who are fighting to preserve their church buildings. Wouldn't it be better to go back to the Bible and do things God's way instead?