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INDIGENOUS OR LEGITIMATE?

“The Identity Crisis of The National Church”

BY

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Biblical Principles For Living Series

OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION:

- Signs of Maturity
- Spiritual Adolescence
- Spiritual Adulthood
- Dying Denominationalism
- Post-Christian Europe
- Indigenous Integrity
- Early Christian Divisions
- Cultural Circumcision

1. CHURCH NAMES:

- Sectarianism
- Personality Cults
- Theological Divisions
- Mere Christianity
- Location, Location, Location

2. CHURCH TITLES:

- Religious Professionalism
- The Priesthood of Believers
- Donkeys or Doctors?

3. CHURCH DRESS:

- Dressing the Part
- Dressed to Impress
- Dressed Like Jesus
- Riches or Rags?
- Paul's Wardrobe
- Pagan Pursuit of Clothing
- Dynamic Dressing
- The Idolatry of Externals

4. CHURCH BUILDINGS:

- Churches Without Buildings

- **A Home Church or Home Churches?**
- **The Edifice Complex**
- **The Old Testament Church**
- **The Jesus Temple**
- **God's Living Temple**
- **Identity Crisis in the Church**
- **Homeless Christians**
- **Underground Churches**
- **Nomadic Churches**
- **Fancy or Functional?**

5. CHURCH WORSHIP:

- **Indigenous Worship**
- **The Order of Worship**
- **Worship in Spirit and Truth**
- **True Worship and False Worship**
- **Freedom and Form**
- **Worship 24/7**

6. CHURCH GIVING:

- **The Giving God**
- **New Testament giving**
- **Reasons for Giving**
- **Needy Saints**
- **Firstfruit Giving**
- **Mission Giving**
- **Pastor Support**
- **No Foreign Support**
- **Giving for buildings**

7. CHURCH UNITY:

- **Denominational Division**
- **3 Sources of Division'**
- **Savior Divisions**
- **Satanic Divisions**

- **Selfish Divisions**
- **Unity in the Spirit**
- **National Church Unity**
- **Unity for Evangelism**
- **7-Fold Basis of Unity**

CONCLUSIONS

INTRODUCTION

Planting and maturing a truly *indigenous* church has always been one of the biggest missiological challenge – whether in the First Century or Twenty-First Century. It was the biggest challenge that

the Apostle Paul faced in cross-cultural evangelism and church-planting in the decades following Christ's resurrection and ascension. It has continued to be the same daunting challenge for missionaries ever since.

It is usually far easier for missionaries to make a "foreign transplant" of a non-indigenous church than to develop a truly *national church* that is not an *illegitimate spiritual hybrid*. That's why so many churches on the mission field have more of a western ecclesiastical appearance and flavor than a spiritual DNA that is truly indigenous and autonomous.

SIGNS OF MATURITY

One of the most important mission goals has always been to produce authentic "3-Self-Churches." That means that they are fully *self-governing, self-propagating* and *self-supporting*. But since many national churches have been predominantly "foreign transplants" by missionaries representing various western denominations and mission agencies, that has often times not the case. As a result, far too many of these national churches are *mission-governing, mission-propagating* and *mission-funded* – therefore almost *totally dependent* upon outside support for their continuation and growth.

Principle:

"An authentic indigenous church is one that has become *self-governing, self-propagating* and *self-supporting*."

However, in this post-colonial day of nationalism, many local churches want to be fully *self-governing...partially self-propagating...and almost totally missionary-funded!* While they want to have the spiritual and ecclesiastical authority to fully govern themselves and be totally "in charge," they often still want the mission agency to "pick up the tab" for their personal support and the financial needs of their church. This is what I call "spiritual

adolescence” where the national church wants all of the *authority* and *autonomy* of being indigenous – with little or none of the financial responsibilities and accountabilities that go along with that state of maturity and independence.

Principle:

“Adult *authority* and *autonomy* cannot be separated from adult *accountability*.”

SPIRITUAL ADOLESCENCE

One of the reasons why *physical adolescence* in the family is the most difficult stage of the parent-child relationship is this very fact of *semi-adulthood*. The adolescent you produced no longer has the body of an infant or child. As they grew and matured through puberty with all of its explosive hormonal changes, they increasingly developed the body of an adult. Physically and sexually they have “come of age” – and want to be “treated like an adult” in every way.

But while they have a grown-up body, they often do not yet have the spiritual, mental and emotional maturity to match their physical development. While their outer man or outer woman is mature, their inner man and inner woman are still struggling with adolescent immaturity – with all of its mood-swings and emotional ups-and-downs. One minute they are rebelling against parental authority and *demanding* all of the rights and privileges of adulthood. The next minute they are wanting all of the support and security of being a child “under their parent’s roof” – with little or no expectations or responsibility.

Also, during adolescence the young people want to have free access to the money and material possessions of the parents – with few of the responsibilities that go along with them. They want the power of the family bank account and credit cards – but not the payments that make them possible. They want the privilege of

“drawing out” – but not the responsibility of “putting in!” They want to be able to *play* but not *pay*!

That’s why these adolescent years between the ages of around 10 to 18 are generally a time of constant tension between the parents and their teenagers – especially in the West where this time of adolescence has been so pampered and prominent. And in America today there is often an unhealthy extension of this adolescent attitude into the 20s and 30s! That’s because more and more young people are postponing marriage and careers through more education, travel and play – generally paid for by the parents or by “student loans.” So this prolonged-adolescent-no-man’s-land between childhood and adulthood becomes a time of tension and frustration as the young person seeks to “find themselves.” As a result, it becomes a real relational roller-coaster-ride for both the parent and adolescent – with a lot of family “chills, thrills and spills” along the way!

That state of adolescent-parental tension also describes many missionary-national relationships around the world today. Both want control of the mission enterprise. Both want to “call the shot.” Both want to make the final determination on the “new directions” of the local church in this new millennium. The “missionary parent” often wants to hold onto authority while the “national teenager” wants to usurp that power. As a result, relationships are often strained to the breaking point. Sadly, it is not uncommon for long-standing ministry friendships and partnerships to be broken because of this relational and organizational tension.

Principle:

“In the *spiritual family* of God, many missionary-national relationships are characterized by the *parent-adolescent struggle* in the *physical family*.”

SPIRITUAL ADULTHOOD

I am not suggesting however, that every national church is in a state of spiritual adolescence while the missionary body represents spiritual maturity. Far from it. There are areas of spiritual maturity and emotional immaturity on both sides of these mission and ministry relationships and partnerships. Certainly many national leaders and churches have long ago passed the stage of spiritual adolescence and are very mature “adult churches” in every sense of the word. Many are doing incredible jobs of evangelism, church-planting and discipleship to the degree that they are birthing many other daughter churches and grand-daughter churches in their countries and cultures – as well as cross-culturally. They are also producing powerful preachers and learned teachers of the Gospel. In addition, they are also raising up their own astute theologians and Bible scholars who are ably leading the church a sound and sensitive contextualization of the Gospel in their countries and cultures.

DYING DENOMINATIONALISM

As a result of their more conservative Biblical worldview, many of the national church leaders are now being used by God to speak prophetically to the “mother mission churches” in the West. That’s because many of their parent churches have compromised with the world and strayed from their historic spiritual and Biblical moorings. Many American and European churches have become far more concerned with “political correctness” than “spiritual correctness.” They have swapped their spiritual and Biblical authority for the ever-shifting relativism of the world. As a result, most traditional denominations have been hemorrhaging members by the hundred of thousands for the last several decades.

However, in most of these traditional denominations, there is still a “believing remnant” who have not “...bowed the knee to Baal” (1 Kings 19:18). They have not bought into the liberal and leftist agenda being perpetrated by many of their bishops and ecclesiastical hierarchy. Nor have they lost their love for Christ... their belief in the authority of the Scriptures...their desire for

authentic worship...their hunger for Biblical fellowship...and their passion for the lost and needy of the world. So in desperation for ecclesiastical integrity and authenticity, many are turning their eyes and hearts toward the church in the Developing Countries for spiritual authority and guidance. They are looking to the leaders in national churches to become their pastors and the spiritual shepherds of their souls. This is a totally unforeseen missiological development that few Christian leaders in the First World or Two-Thirds World ever anticipated! It is a totally unique move of the Holy Spirit to purify and protect the Bride of Christ.

Much to the surprise of traditional denominational leaders, many entire churches in the West are now withdrawing from their ecclesiastical authority structures and putting themselves under bishops and church leaders from Africa, Asia and South America where the church is so vibrant and powerful. So in many places in the West, *the national church is now spiritually nurturing the mother church that has become divided, deluded, disillusioned, dry, dormant and dead!* As a result, fresh winds of the Spirit are blowing and bringing spiritual renewal, revival and Church growth.

Principle:

In many parts of the world, the national church is now spiritually nurturing the mother church that birthed her.”

Therefore, if some national churches are in *spiritual adolescence*, many Western churches are in a state of *spiritual geriatrics!* As a result, entire denominations are on “spiritual life-support.” There are few if any vital signs of spiritual life. “Denominational death” and “religious rigor mortis” have already set in! Church doors are being closed all across America – especially in the inner cities. Their once filled sanctuaries and Sunday School classes are now empty. Many of these once vibrant churches are being occupied by cultic groups, Eastern Mysticism and radical Islam – just like what has already taken place in much of Europe.

Principle:

“While many national churches are struggling with *spiritual adolescence*;
many Western churches are struggling with *spiritual geriatrics*.”

POST-CHRISTIAN EUROPE

Sadly, Europe went through this spiritual decline, devolution and death decades ago. In the very countries and cities in Europe which were the birth places of the Reformation, the Wesley Revivals, the Great Awakenings and the Modern Missionary Movement – the people are now living in the *post-Christian era*. This time of church decline and death is also being referred to as the “New Dark Ages.” Many of the once famous churches are empty religious museums and mausoleums that silently testify to days gone by of spiritual virility and vitality. The result is that few contemporary Europeans give any serious attention to the church or Christianity – which are generally seen as passé and irrelevant. As a result, most Europeans are largely secular, humanistic, hedonistic and pagan in their worldview. Sadly, the church just doesn’t matter to most of them.

So while much of the Western church is struggling with ecclesiastical “death issues,” much of the national church is struggling with “birthing challenges” and “life issues.” Many are experiencing a faster church growth than they can manage. Church planting and numerical growth are generally running way ahead of leadership development and theological training.

As a result of this incredible spiritual and numerical growth, the national church is seeking firm spiritual and Biblical footing in the areas of class, culture and contextualization. They are struggling with the birthing and nurturing of an authentic indigenous church. They don’t want to walk down the same path of cultural compromise

and spiritual decline that they have seen their European and American parents go down. They have seen the fatal results of “dry, dead orthodoxy.” So they do not want to force the “new wine of the Spirit” that is being poured out in their countries into the “old wine skins” of dying denominationalism in the West. Nor do they want to see the worldly leavening of their churches by naturalism, secularism, rationalism, humanism, materialism and hedonism – that have largely leavened and destroyed much of the Western church.

INDIGENOUS INTEGRITY

While some national Christian leaders are being seduced by “media Christianity” from America, others are rejecting the superficiality of this Western spiritual hybrid that is little more than “baptized materialism.” Rather than copying and imitating the glitzy celluloid preachers, tele-evangelists, signs-and-wonder workers or health-and-wealth “prophets for profit” who can now be seen on TV all over the world, many national leaders are striving for spiritual maturity and Biblical balance. While appreciating the historic evangelical or Pentecostal heritage they have received from Western missionaries, they are now seeking to fully mature in Christ and become truly indigenous in every way.

But just like the First Century Church, these Twentieth and Twenty-First Century national churches face many pressures that lead them to compromise their *indigenous integrity*. They face the pressures of *missionary theology* and *western ecclesiology* on the one side – and *religious traditionalism* and *cultural syncretism* on the other.

Principle:

“In their growth toward authentic *indigenous integrity*, the national church struggles between *missionary theology* and *Western ecclesiology* on the one hand and *religious traditionalism* and *cultural syncretism* on the other.”

So there are many “isms” that the evil one uses to leaven the church with in every century. That’s why there is often more of the “leaven of the world” in the church – than there is the “salt of the church” in the world!

However, before the church was even born, Jesus faced these same spiritual, cultural, ethnic and economic pressures with His disciples. So we would certainly expect to find the First Century Church struggling with these very same internal and external pressures. Therefore, let’s look and learn from them.

EARLY CHURCH DIVISIONS

The New Testament clearly reveals that the Early Church in Jerusalem faced these same theological and cultural tensions that we face today. The names and faces were different but the pressures to compromise were the same. And these religious and cultural pressures produced the first potential “denominational split” in the First Century Church. Soon after Pentecost, the Jerusalem Church faced the opposite pressures of the *Judaizers* on the one side and the *Hellenizers* on the other. Both were seeking to dominate the spiritual culture of the young church. Both wanted “their theology” and “their tradition” to become the norm for everyone else in the church. Sound familiar?!

Perhaps it would be helpful at this point to examine these two early “Jewish denominations” a bit more.

- *Judaizers*: They were also known as the “*Circumcision Party*.” They wanted to make all Gentile converts to Christ “*cultural Jews*.” They wanted all of them to *think* like a Jew...*live* like a Jew...*dress* like a Jew...*act* like a Jew...*eat* like a Jew...*worship* like a Jew! They wanted every believer to become a “true blue Jew through and through!” They were the “religious traditionalists” who wanted everything to remain the same as it had always been in their religion. They wanted everything in Judaism to be just like it was “when God handed it down to

Moses on Mt. Sinai!” However, they themselves were not unified in their theological perspective. Over time they became divided between “conservatives” and “liberals” – just like the church is today.

The “Jewish conservatives” were the Pharisees with their group of *scribes* and religious *lawyers* who were zealously committed to prosecuting anyone who transgressed the smallest “letter of the law.” In reality, they were the “fighting fundamentalists” of Judaism and were the numerical majority during the time of Christ. Down through the centuries their “traditions of the elders” had developed almost equal authority with the Torah, or Laws of Moses. Interestingly, they were the ones that Jesus had the most conflict with. And as we know from the New Testament, the Apostle Paul was from this party. He was a Pharisee with great zeal and authority in Judaism before his conversion to Christ (Phil. 3:4-6).

Their religious counterpart was the *Sadducees* who were more theologically liberal. They tended to be from a higher socio-economic-educated class and were the numerical minority. They only accepted as authoritative the Laws of Moses in the Pentateuch, but rejected the “scribal traditions” that had developed over the generations among the Pharisees. As is often the case with people from this class, they championed the “free will” of man over the sovereign intervention of God in the affairs of man. So they were the anti-supernaturalists of their day who did not believe in miracles. They had little or no place in their religion for the supernatural, angels, miracles, healing, signs and wonders or the resurrection (Acts 23:8). As a result of their dead orthodoxy, they were *sad-u-see!* And their liberal counterparts today are still generally *sad* and *mad* when it comes to their relationship with religious conservatives and evangelicals! So the theological fight goes on!

- *Hellenizers*: They were on the opposite side of the Jewish faith from the Judaizers. Since they were the Jews of the Diaspora, they wanted the Early Church to embrace much of the “*culture of the Greeks*” – just like they had done as they were dispersed among the Gentiles. These Hellenized Jews and fellow Greek Gentile converts wanted the church to adopt *Greek philosophy ...Greek thinking...Greek living...Greek language*. So they were the “non-traditionalists” who wanted the church to be more “contemporary” and “multi-cultural” so as to better accommodate Greek Culture. They wanted to be more “relevant” to the Roman World and Greek Culture they were living in.

If time and space permitted, we could also look at several other important Jewish groups. Two are mentioned in the New Testament and one is not. First there were the *Herodians* and *Zealots* who were more *political* in their theological orientation (Matt. 22:16; Mk. 3:6, 18; 12:13). And like is so often the case, they were on opposite extremes when it came to politics. While the Herodians advocated *political correctness* and *governmental expediency* with King Herod and Rome, the Zealots were into *liberation theology*. As the radical revolutionaries of their day, the zealots practiced covert and overt armed rebellion against Rome. Their philosophy was this: “The only good Roman is a dead Roman!” And they carried small daggers under their robes to help make that happen – especially to the ever-present Roman soldiers. It is interesting that Jesus chose as one of His disciples, “Simon the *Zealot*” (Mk. 3:18). He would have been a radical “fire-brand” on any church committee!

Finally, history and archaeologist tell us about the *Essenes*. They were the extreme *Jewish separatists* of their day who practiced *Monasticism* out in the desert around the Dead Sea. Because of certain theological similarities, some historians and theologians believe that both John the Baptist and Jesus could have spent some time with these Jewish separatists in the desert of Judea. But there is no clear Biblical proof of this. Regardless, their

influence on Judaism was significant. It was their radical and fanatical dedication to the Scriptures that gave us the now famous Dead Sea Scrolls.

Once again we see in these various theological and political Jewish groups this principle: *“The more things change the more they remain the same!”* That’s why the church today is still struggling with variations of these very same old theological, cultural, political and methodological tensions.

Principle:

“While times and circumstances may change, man does not. Therefore, the church in every century faces variations of the same theological, political and cultural pressures.”

CULTRAL CIRCUMCISION

Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles were led to chart a course between each of these extremes – as demonstrated in Acts 6. But since the vast majority of the first converts to Christ at Pentecost were Jews by race and religion, *the culture of Judaism tended to dominate the early church*. As the church became cross-cultural into Gentile and Greek territory, the traditions of Judaism still tended to dominate. The result was the planting of largely “Jewish Christian Churches” that were still very *Jewish* in nature.

However, through the conversion of “Saul the Pharisee” into “Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles,” this ‘Jewishness’ was increasingly set aside. In the face of such pressure from the Judaizers, Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians: “Stand firm...don’t be moved!” (Gal. 5:1). What he meant was that they should “stand firm” in the spiritual freedom of the *grace* they had received in Christ and not be seduced by the *legalism* of the Judaizers.

Therefore, *while the church was born in Jerusalem at Pentecost, it matured and came of age in Antioch*. That’s because it was only at

Antioch that the early church became truly cross-cultural and multi-cultural. It broke out of the “Jewish Ghetto mentality” and became a World Class Church and Great Commission Church. Through the Holy Spirit, the Church at Antioch broke out of the theological, ecclesiastical and cultural grave clothes of Judaism.

Principle:

“While the church was born in Jerusalem at Pentecost,
It matured and came of age in Antioch.”

The early church then, gradually broke the barrier of class, creed and culture – primarily through the preaching and teaching of Paul. And while he was uncompromising in his theological orthodoxy, he was flexible in his approach to evangelism. He set the bar for missiological methodology when he wrote:

“Though I am free and belong to no man, *I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.* To the Jews, I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those *under the law* I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those *not having the law*, I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the *weak*, I became weak, to win the weak. *I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.* I do all this for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (I Cor. 9:19-23).

Paul’s example and spiritual exhortation needs to be heeded on many mission fields today in the face of the dominant pressure of “American Churches”... “European Churches”... “Korean Churches”... “Chinese Churches,” etc. Our national brethren must “stand firm” in the basic essentials of the “...faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), while being flexible in their application cross-culturally.

Paul rightly understood that the local church must not be *dependent* upon anyone except Christ – Who alone is the “Head of the Church” (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; Col. 2:10). As the “Body of Christ,” each local church must be totally dependent upon her spiritual head – the Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing or no one else must dominate – neither Judaism, Hellenism, Legalism or Romanism.

Therefore, the local church is never to be dependent upon some “*foreign head*” that wants to take control and headship from Christ.

Principle:

“*A dependent church is a dominated church!*”

When a local church becomes *dependent* upon outside *foreign funding*, it ceases to be a truly *indigenous church* and becomes an *illegitimate church* in many ways. She becomes like a child born from an illegitimate sexual relationship between two people who are not married – who are not “one in Christ.” This local church then is the result of an illicit union *spiritually and financially!*

With those principles in mind, the New Testament exhorts us to *stand firm* in the following 7 areas...

-1-

CHURCH NAMES

One of the greatest problems in the church today worldwide is *denominational divisiveness*. That’s why there are literally thousands of distinct denominations – each with its own theology, tradition and hierarchy. According to missiologists, David Barrett, in 1900 there were some 1,880 different denominations. The last count I saw was 33,800 distinct denominations – and growing weekly! There seems to be no end to our ability as Christians to come up with new denominations and new names. The dominant

Christian philosophy of church growth seems to be “multiply by dividing!”

SECTARIANISM

This growth in denominationalism is a reflection of the innate *sectarian spirit* in all of us human beings. That’s why Paul listed a “party spirit” among the works of the flesh” – which he said produce “...*disputes, dissensions, factions.*” Or as the New Living Translation expresses it: “...quarreling, jealousy...selfish ambition, *divisions, the feeling that everyone is wrong except those in your own little group*” (Gal. 5:20). What a timely and telling description of so much of our denominationalism and sectarianism as Christians!

When it comes to our faith, so many of us want to come up with some uniqueness...some distinctive...some experience...some theology...some practice that will “set us apart” from all other Christians. Rather than emphasizing our areas of unity with other believers, we emphasize our individual distinctives. Religious leaders have always been vulnerable to this desire to be “different.” To find or experience...some esoteric knowledge...some secret formula...some lost rite...some miraculous ritual...some magic mantra...some special anointing – that will give them a “spiritual advantage” and “theological edge” over everyone else.

Once the spiritual leader receives this “special revelation” and “special anointing” from God – he or she has the spiritual *modus operandi* for their movement. This experience...this name...this doctrine...this formula – soon becomes the total focus of their ministry. It defines them...consumes them...motivates them...exalts them – and separates them from all others. It becomes the end all for everything. And this “spiritual distinctive” soon generates both *followers* and *finances!* Thus denominations, sects and cults are born.

This *sectarian spirit* has always had a cultic flavor. History has shown that there is often a fine spiritual line between an authentic

apostolic leader and a heretic...between a genuine move of God and an esoteric mystery movement ...between an out-pouring of the Holy Spirit and a carnal manifestation of the flesh...between the birth of a real New Testament church and a counter-Christian cult!

Only a combination of authentic *accountability* and *transparency* – along with a constant *immersion in the Word and Spirit*, will keep a Christian leader in the main stream of historic orthodoxy.

Principle:

“Only *personal accountability* and *financial transparency* with other mature Christian leaders will safeguard a charismatic person from heresy in life, love and leadership.”

PERSONALITY CULTS

One of the most important distinguishing marks of a sect or cult from an authentic church is how the founder projects himself or herself. Also how their followers view them. Very soon most of these founders become “larger than life” spiritually. In reality, they are exalted more than Christ. He or she becomes a “Christ-substitute” for their followers. They are exalted to the place of spiritual infallibility. They can say or do no wrong. They are above question or criticism. There is little or no spiritual humility in their lives. *Arrogant authority* often defines their persona. At the end of the day, they are not accountable to anyone. And only their followers are truly saved...enlightened...spirit-filled...empowered...victorious. Everyone else is on the “outside” and have not yet “arrived spiritually.” In their wake there is always an “us” and “them” separation when it comes to experience, fellowship and worship. (*)

Principle:

“Every dynamic Christian leader is vulnerable to cult-like beliefs and behavior and a sectarian spirit that exalts the ego and manipulates both followers and finances.”

Foornote:

(*) For a further study of this subject, see my book entitled *Identifying and Dealing With Cults* (www.jlwilliams.net).

Just like we do today, the early Christians struggled with the tendency of “leadership exaltation” and spiritual “hero worship.” But the Spirit led them not to fall into this personality trap – especially through the exhortation and example of Paul. Therefore, unlike many of the churches since that time, the Early Church did not name itself after *men* – even if they were the founders of the church. Note this strong and stern rebuke by the Apostle Paul in the face of such pressure:

“I appeal to you brothers in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be *no division among you* and that you may be *perfectly united*...that there be no quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, ‘*I follow Paul*’; another, ‘*I follow Apollos*’; another, ‘*I follow Cephas*’; still another, ‘*I follow Christ*.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?” (I Cor. 1:10-13)

With similar passion he wrote:

“Brothers, I could not address you as *spiritual*, but as *worldly* – mere *infants in Christ*...For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, ‘*I follow Paul*,’ and another, ‘*I follow Apollos*,’ are you not mere men? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe...” (I Cor. 3:1-3)

So Paul would not let the people name a church after him – nor call it after one of the other renown Apostles. This was a spiritual

heresy that he would not tolerate in any way, shape or form! He wanted the focus to be squarely on the Lord Jesus – not on himself or on any other Apostle or Christian leader.

The Church in the West has generally not followed Paul's example or admonition in this area but has named churches after mere men or their forms of church polity. For example:

- John the Baptist.....Baptist
- Martin Luther.....Lutheran Church
- John Wesley.....Methodist Church
- John Calvin.....Presbyterian
- Reformers.....Reformed Church
- George Fox.....Quakers/Friends
- Count Zinzendorf.....Moravians, etc.

We might paraphrase Paul again at this point by saying:

- *“If John the Baptist saved you, call yourself a “Baptist.”*
- *“If John Calvin saved you, call yourself a “Presbyterian.”*
- *“If John Wesley saved you, call yourself a “Methodist.”*
- *If George Fox saved you call yourself a “Quaker.”*
- *“If Martin Luther saved you, call yourself a “Lutheran.”*
- *“If the Pope saved you, call yourself a “Catholic.”*

However, *if Jesus saved you, call yourself a “Christian...a follower of Christ!”*

The New Testament then, expressly forbids us to call ourselves after mere men. While we all have greatly benefited from the lives, learning and leadership of great Christians, we are never to identify ourselves solely with them and their theology. We take our spiritual identity exclusively from Christ and Him alone. That way the focus is squarely on the “...one mediator between God and men, the *Man Christ Jesus*, who gave Himself as a ransom for all men” (I Tim. 2:5).

Principle:

“The church has one Head and that is the Lord Jesus.
All human leaders must exalt His supreme Headship.”

THEOLOGICAL DIVISIONS

Nor should we name our churches after specific *theological positions or persuasions* – regardless of how meaningful they are for us and our Christian lives. It is very obvious that most of these distinct theological positions are closely associated with some particular person in Christian history who is seen as the founder and champion of that doctrinal position. They and their followers built up a specific “Systematic Theology” around their particular interpretation of the Bible. Sadly however, these rigid doctrinal and theological positions still tend to divide and fragment the Body of Christ all over the world. Here are some of the more major theological positions espoused by different denominations and church groups.

- Baptist
- Wesleyan
- Arminian
- Calvinist
- Covenant
- Reformed
- Dispensational
- Presbyterian
- Episcopalian
- Evangelical
- Pentecostal
- Full Gospel
- Holiness
- Fundamentalist
- Orthodox, etc.

Is it any wonder then, that people outside the church are often so confused over the theological divisions inside the church! And sadly, most Christians today who would place themselves under one of these theological banners – would be hard pressed to give an intelligent explanation of the history or distinctive of that denomination or theological persuasion. They wear a “theological label” that most of them do not understand. Nor could many of them articulate or defend the “denominational distinctive” that they worship and fellowship under.

Don't get me wrong. I am not naïve enough to think that these theological positions and denominational divisions will ever go away! Quite the contrary. No doubt they will continue to multiply and divide until the Lord returns! As we have already seen, since they existed in the Judaism of Christ's day – we can expect them to continue in our day. But I believe that mature Christians should emphasize more and more their “unity in the Spirit” rather than there “disunity in theology.”

MERE CHRISTIANITY

As I have already pointed out, these divisions and personality cults also started in the First Century in the wake of the ministry of the Apostle Paul and have continued to this very day and hour. So while they will never go away completely, I pray and work for the time when we Christian leaders will emphasize them less and reach out for fellowship and partnership with those of other theological persuasion. One day in heaven we will have all eternity to discuss these theological differences! At that time the Lord Jesus will straighten out all of our theologies and clear up the spiritual blind spots that all of us have!

Therefore, until we get to heaven, we should have a *loving humility* that says with Paul: “Now I *know in part*; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (I Cor. 13:12). Note here Paul's distinction between “now” and “then.” *Now*, only the best of us “...

know in part.” But *then* all of us will “...know fully, even as we are known.” It is only that kind of spiritual humility that will cause us to seek that “most excellent way” that Paul wrote about in this famous “Love Chapter” of the New Testament. Like him, between *now* and *then* we need to: “Follow the way of love” (I Cor. 12:31; 14:1).

As Christians then, we have far more in common than we have at difference. This spiritual and theological commonality is what C.S. Lewis called “Mere Christianity” – the title of his most famous book. Unfortunately, many of us have emphasized “*More* Christianity” instead – intimating that we have *more* truth...*more* Biblical knowledge...*more* light...*more* spirituality...*more* power...*more* authenticity – than others!

When it comes to our hold on the truth, we all need a healthy dose of humble agnosticism! While the Bible reveals *true truth*, it does not reveal *exhaustive truth*, as Francis Schaffer rightly expressed it. There are still many *unrevealed truths* that God has not chosen to disclose to us – what the Bible calls the “secret things” that belong only to God (Deut. 29:29). As finite beings, we are just not capable of receiving *all* of the truth that God is and has. But through the Bible, God has revealed to us all that we need to know and are capable of understanding in this life. So if God has not yet revealed *total truth* to us, we should never come across to other Christian brothers and sisters like we “have all of the answers” about every spiritual issue and theological question.

Principle:

“As Christians we must simultaneously grip truth firmly while we hold theology lightly – humbly realizing that while we have *true truth* through the Bible we do not have *exhaustive truth*.”

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

In the field of Real Estate there is a basic principle when it comes to the desirability and value of a piece of property. The experts say there are only 3 issues concerning property: “Location, location and location.” That means that there is nothing more important in buying or selling property than its *location*. In other words, the better the location, the higher the price; the poorer the location, the lower the price. You either have “prime property” or “poor property.”

For the First Century Christians, their *location* was the only name associated with their home churches – regardless of which side of the town or city they lived on. Their “prime property” was the particular *location* that God had sovereignly placed them in. It was there that they were to “bloom where they were planted.” That way they were fully identified with the geographical location they lived in. There was no association with some “outside” or “foreign” group. They were firmly rooted and grounded in their geographical *location* and with the people they lived among. That’s because God loves every part of the world He created and the people living in every geographical location – whether it is a remote village, small town, large city or mega-metroplex. So He wanted His Body to be fully identified with the *location* and *local people*. Not with some particular person.

By contrast then, most of the myriads of denominations we have across America and the world have a strong human focus. They take their names from their “founding fathers” or from their “theological distinctives” – which we will look at in more detail below. But the Early Church took her name only from her *geographical location* – not from *men* or *theologies*. This kept the individual Christian leader from taking center stage and being exalted. In any given *locality*, the church was the “ecclesia” or the “called out ones.” They were the people that God had spiritually “called to Himself” through the Lord Jesus and filled with His Holy Spirit. But after they were “called out,” they were “sent back in” to their towns and cities as God’s “salt” and “light.” They were to be *His Church* in that location until God called them home to heaven.

Therefore, in the New Testament we read about the churches in the following locations...

- “...Church of God in *Corinth*...” (I Cor. 1:2; II Cor. 1:1);
- “...*Macedonian* Churches...” (II. Cor. 8:1);
- “...*Galatian* Churches” (I. Cor. 16:1);
- “...Church of the *Thessalonians*” (I Thess. 1:1; II Thess. 1:1);
- “...Church in *Ephesus*” (Rev. 2:1);
- “...Church in *Smyrna*” (Rev. 2:8);
- “...Church in *Pergamum*” (Rev. 2:12);
- “...Church in *Thyatira*” (Rev. 2:18);
- “...Church in *Sardis*” (Rev. 3:1);
- “...Church in *Philadelphia*” (Rev. 3:7);
- “...Church in *Laodicea*” (Rev. 3:14), etc.

How helpful it would be then, if all the churches today in a particular area were simply named after their *location*. Therefore when you met a Christian they would just say: “I belong to the church of Burlington” (which is where I live). Or...

- “*I belong to the church of Bombay.*”
- “*I belong to the church of Hong Kong.*”
- “*I belong to the church of Nairobi.*”
- “*I belong to the church of Port-au-Prince.*”
- “*I belong to the church of Kathmandu.*”

- “*I belong to the church of Timbuktu.*”
- “*I belong to the church of Toronto.*”
- “*I belong to the church of Mexico City.*”
- “*I belong to the church of Managua.*”
- “*I belong to the church of Sao Pablo.*” Etc, etc.

If this was the case, there would be a sense of *unity* among the believers. They would all be apart of the *same church* – just meeting in different houses and buildings in the same general geographical *location*. And the people they were living among in that location would perceive them as individual parts of a larger group – not as segregated and segmented groups all competing for prominence and power.

But because the church has deviated from this New Testament norm of calling itself after its *location*, a great sense of *internal unity* has been lost as well as a great deal of our *external witness*. Now unbelievers in any locality do not see the unified Body of Christ. They see *Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Catholics, Episcopalians, Independents* – and scores of others! But God does not see us that way. He only sees *His children...His sons and daughters...His family...His sheep...His Body...His Bride...His Ambassadors* to the people they were living among. He does not see scores of separated little groups each calling themselves by different names and distinctives. He only sees *His Beloved* for whom His Son died and in whom His Spirit dwells! How we need to see ourselves as God sees us – and then act like it!

So there are not *many* churches. There is only *one* Universal Church that has an infinite number of *local fellowships!* May God help us *be* His church in our location for His glory and for the evangelization of the lost!

Principle:

“Every church is to identify with the geographical location and local people God has sovereignly planted them in –
Not with some foreign denomination or theological group.”

-2-

CHURCH TITLES:

Not only should we not divide ourselves along theological lines, we should not adopt unbiblical *titles* that only serve to further divide the Body of Christ. Today the Body of Christ is divided between...

- “*ordained*” and “*unordained*”
- “*priest*” and “*people*”
- “*clergy*” and “*laity*”
- “*professional*” and “*novice*”
- “*minister*” and “*congregation*”
- “*vocational*” and “*volunteer*” etc

RELIGIOUS PROFESSIONALISM

In addition, titles like: “*Pope*”...“*Cardinal*”...“*Bishop*”...“*Arch-Bishop*”...“*Reverend*”...“*Doctor*”...“*Priest*”...“*Apostle*”...“*Prophet*,” etc, have also helped create a “*professional hierarchy*” in the church. Just like we are prone to exalt religious leaders and name movements and churches after them, we love to lavish spiritual and academic titles upon them. In many cases, the religious leader claims one or more of these titles for themselves. This only further separates them from “ordinary Christians” and exalts them to a status of “spiritually elite.”

However, leadership is about *influence* – not *titles*. That’s why there is a leadership maxim that says: “Titles do not make a leader.” All over the world there are people with titles who cannot lead people out of a paper bag! They have titles but no influence over people. Many people do not understand this crucial difference between titles and leadership. Many want-to-be-leaders wrongly think that if they can earn a certain religious or academic title, it will automatically give them influence and make them a respected leader. But authentic leaders do not need titles to enable them to lead. It is usually just the opposite. It is their natural influence that causes people to follow them. And one thing for sure: *if no one is following – you are not a leader!* It is a leader’s influence on others that earns them the respect of others who often thrust upon them titles and honorary degrees. One is the root and the other is the fruit. Therefore, *it is not the title that makes a leader. It is the leader who authenticates the title.*

Principle:

“Titles do not make a person a leader.
Influence makes a person a leader.”

Once again we see in the New Testament that this fixation on titles is not a new phenomena. The religious leaders of Christ’s day were title-oriented. They heaped titles upon themselves in order to gain the respect of the “common people.” Jesus sternly warned His disciples not to follow the examples of the Pharisees in this prideful projection of titles:

“...they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘*Rabbi.*’ But you are not to be called ‘*Rabbi,*’ for you have only one Master and *you are all brothers.* And do not call anyone on earth ‘*father,*’ for you have one Father, and He is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘*teacher,*’ for you have

one Teacher, the Christ. *The greatest among you will be your servant.*” (Matthew 23:7-11)

THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE BELIEVERS

The normal *title* for Christians in the New Testament were words like: “*Brethren...brothers and sisters...brotherhood of believers*” (Matt. 25:40; Mark 3:35; Luke 22:32; Acts 15:32; Rom. 9:3; Heb. 2:11, 17; 13:1; Jn 2:15; 1 Pet. 1:22; 2:17; 1 Jn. 3:14-16; Rev. 12:10, etc.). How unifying it would be if we could get back to these Biblical titles that give equal spiritual dignity to every believer! And what great spiritual dynamic we would see in the church if we truly believed in and practiced the “priesthood of all believers” (1 Pet. 2:9), rather than the exclusive priesthood of an elite “priestly class” of professional clergy!

Principle:

“The New Testament teaches the ‘priesthood of every believer’ rather than the elite ‘priestly class’ of a few religious professionals.”

DONKEYS OR DOCTORS?

While I am “ordained” and have the word “Doctor” before my name because of an earned Doctor of Ministry academic degree, I still ask people to just call me “J.L.” I do not want people to refer to me or introduce me as “The Right Reverend Doctor J.L. Williams!” I never want my academic degrees or ministerial titles to become a barrier between me and people. That’s why I often refer to myself as nothing more than a “donkey for Jesus!” My highest calling is to be like the donkey on Palm Sunday that took Jesus to the people. The ‘Hosannas,’ praises and palm branches that day were not for the donkey – but for Jesus! He was the focal point – not the lowly donkey. That’s the way it should be for all of us as Christian leaders. We are just called to be available and faithful donkeys that will humbly carry Jesus and His resources wherever He directs us. That way He gets the honor and glory rather than us.

So fellow Christian donkeys, let's "saddle up" and take Jesus and His resources to a hungry and needy world – and forget who gets the credit!

Principle:

"The greatest title in the Kingdom of God is *servant!*"

-3-

CHURCH DRESS:

In our last chapter we saw the principle: "*Titles do not make a leader.*" In this chapter we will see a similar principle: "*Clothes do not make a religious leader.*" But just like we often heap "religious titles" on people who are not authentic spiritual leaders called and ordained by God; we put "religious garb" on people to further separate them from ordinary Christians.

However, rather than "dress up" in some tale-tale religious garb, *local church leaders should wear the clothing of the people they live among and minister to.* They should not adopt *foreign* or *western forms of clothing or styles of dress.* These only make the national Christian leader look "foreign" rather than "local." Whenever they adopt western "religious uniforms," it only makes them stand out as an "outsider" among their own people. As a result, they become *illegitimate* rather than *indigenous* in the area of dress and outward appearance.

Principle:

"National leaders should continue to dress like their own people – rather than adopt the styles of dress of foreigners."

DRESSING THE PART

Sadly however, in many countries of the world, local churches have adopted religious styles of dress that are not at all indigenous. They have adopted things like *robes, vestments, clerical collars, miter hats, suits* and *ties* – all usually adorned with large and ornate crosses of silver or gold! These often create an unnecessary barrier between the pastors and the people – which is often exactly what the Christian leader wants to take place! He feels that by “looking religious” as a result of a certain dress code, he or she will be perceived as “spiritual” and “holy” and deserving of honor and respect. They want their “religious attire” to separate them from the common people and announce their presence as a “man of God” or “woman of God.” This is nothing more than vain religiosity that is not even skin-deep! It is the spiritual “grave clothes” of religious carnality that feeds the ego and glorifies the flesh.

John the Baptist was an anointed spiritual leader. As such, he attracted great crowds of people from every walk of life – from kings and governors to peasants. But they did not come to see and hear him because of the way he dressed but because of his message. Just like the prophet Elijah of old was dressed in “...a garment of hair with a leather belt around his waist (II Kings 1:8), John too dressed simply. The Bible tells us that:

“John’s cloths were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locust and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River” (Matt. 3:4-6).

This simplicity of dress and lifestyle by John was confirmed and affirmed by Christ when He said of John:

“What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’

palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not been anyone greater than John the Baptist..." (Matt. 11:7-11).

In Jesus' description of John the Baptist, He clearly separated the man from his clothing. He specifically pointed out that John was *not* a man of God who was "...dressed in fine clothes." He dressed just the opposite. His clothing was even more simple than those normally worn by the common people. By contrast, Jesus said that "...those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces." And sadly, many religious leaders today "dress like royalty" rather than like humble servants of the Lord Jesus!

DRESSED TO IMPRESS

Sadly, through the Prosperity Preachers, this "royalty mentality" has been widely preached and practiced. As a result, many Western Christian leaders want to live and dress like kings in their designer clothes and tailor made suits! They even tout that we are "King's Kids" who should live like royalty in every way! So they *strut like kings...pontificate like kings...live like kings...dress like kings...eat like kings*. Many even *travel like kings* – going "First Class" in every way. They move about with and entourage of people who do everything for them. Many even have "personal body guards" who protect them from contact with the crowds!

This aloofness from the crowd is obviously a far cry from how John the Baptist, Jesus or Paul lived and ministered. They were constantly immersed in a sea of humanity who pressed in upon them on every side! They were constantly available and accessible to people.

Once again we see how Jesus anticipated this misplaced emphasis on "religious dress." As a result, He clearly warned His disciples

about adopting the *religious* mentality of the Pharisees who emphasized the externals and “dressed to impress.”

- “Everything they do is done for men to see. They make their *phylacteries wide* and the *tassels on their garments long*” (Matthew 23:5).
- “They like to walk around in *flowing robes* and be greeted in the marketplaces...” (Mark 12:38).

DRESSED LIKE JESUS

Those are apt descriptions of so much of religious dress today in the Body of Christ worldwide! Obviously Jesus did not dress that way. He grew up in a carpenter’s shop wearing the simple tunic of a manual worker (Jn. 19:23). Jesus would have been far more comfortable wearing a rough carpenter’s apron than priestly attire.

However, as an observant Jewish man, Jesus would have worn the *Tallith* or Prayer Shawl when He went to the Temple for worship (Num. 15:37-41). He would also have bound the two *Teffilin*, or phylacteries, on His forearm and forehead in prayer in accordance with God’s instruction through Moses (Ex. 13:9; Deut. 11:18). But He would not have gone to the excessive and showy degree in this that was common for the Pharisees so as to distinguish them in public worship. (*)

RICHES OR RAGS?

The Apostle James also warned about how dress can become a basis for separation and division in the church:

“My brothers...don’t show *favoritism*. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and *fine clothes*, and a poor man in *shabby clothes* also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘*Here is a good seat for you,*’ but say to the poor man, ‘*You stand there*’ or ‘*Sit on the floor by my feet,*’ have you not

discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” (James 2:1-4)

Likewise, Jesus succinctly warned: “Stop judging by mere *appearances*, and make right judgment” (John 7:24). Religious robes and garb make us “appear” far more religious and righteous than we really are as Christian leaders. They also subtly perpetuate a dangerous self-deception as well as deception to others about our exalted “spirituality!”

PAUL’S WARDROBE

The Apostle Paul also dressed simply as a “Tent-Making Itinerant Preacher.” In contrast to the “Health and Wealth Prosperity Preachers” of his day, he seemed to boast in a totally opposite life-style from them:

“It seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored. To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, *we are in rags*, we are brutally treated, we are homeless...Up to this very moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world” (I Cor. 4:9-13)

Paul wrote a second letter to this same group of young Christians who were being swayed by the Prosperity Gospel of their day and the “super-apostles” who taught and touted this life-style as the mark of true spirituality. In contrast to their more “safe and successful” ministries, Paul wrote:

“Are they servants of Christ?...I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again...I have labored and toiled and have often *gone without sleep*; I have known *hunger* and *thirst* and have *often gone without food*; I

have been *cold and naked*...If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (II Cor. 11:23-30).

Paul’s apostolic credentials were things like: *hunger, thirst, sleeplessness, cold, homelessness, rags, nakedness, weakness*. That doesn’t sound like much “prosperity living” to me! For most of his ministry, the Apostle Paul didn’t seem to “live like a king’s kid” as a result of the ministry God gave him. Quite the opposite. He said that it seemed like God had made him and his associates the “... scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.” You don’t hear any sermons by the Prosperity Preachers from these Biblical passages!

THE PAGAN PURSUIT OF CLOTHING

The popular preoccupation with prosperity and clothing is one of the Trinitarian concerns that Jesus said we should not worry about. That’s why in the Sermon on the Mount He admonished His disciples:

“Why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things...But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt. 6:31-33).

Therefore, it is a “pagan pursuit” to become preoccupied with clothing – whether secular or religious. That’s why Paul wrote: “We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But *if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that*” (II Tim. 6:7-8). Sadly, many Christian leaders around the world today do not feel they are properly dressed for ministry unless they have

all of the “preacher suits,” robes and vestments that they associate with their calling!

DYNAMIC DRESSING

But Jesus exhorted His disciples to be “...*clothed with power* from on high” (Lk. 24:49). The Holy Spirit is the only spiritual garment that equips and empowers us for ministry! That’s why Paul instructed young Christians to “...*clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus*” (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). He said they should expand their spiritual wardrobe with these “Designer clothes”:

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly beloved, *clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience*” (Col. 3:12).

The Apostle Peter used similar words when he wrote: “All of you, *clothe yourselves with humility* toward one another” (I Pet. 5:5).

What a difference it would make in our lives as Christian leaders if we would go to God’s “clothes closet” and make these spiritual attributes our attire!

Principle:

“Christian leaders are to be clothed in the *righteousness of Christ* rather than in the *riches of this world.*”

THE IDOLATRY OF EXTERNALS

While God gave the Jews and us Christians many special religious symbols and ceremonies to celebrate and worship through, there is a danger that they can become an end in themselves. Over time, the externals of our faith so easily become the focal point of our worship rather than God. As Paul warned, we can have the outward “form of godliness” but not the internal power of the Holy Spirit (II Tim. 3:5). In our weekly worship we often go through the

“pomp and circumstance” of religion while there is little personal transformation of our lives. One writer described his weekly church service this way: “We were faultlessly faultless, icily regularly and *splendidly dull!*”

In the Old Testament, we can see a graphic description of this emphasis on externals in the worship of the “bronze serpent.” Let me remind you of the story.

During the Exodus from Egypt, the Children of Israel rebelled against God and Moses many times in their faithlessness and carnality. As a result, God would discipline them. On one occasion, God sent “venomous snakes” among them that “...bit the people and many Israelites died.” This caused the people to repent before God and Moses. So God instructed Moses: “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can *look* at it and *live*” (Num. 21:4-9). They were saved from death only if they would have faith and “look and live.”

Many years later, Jesus identified with this symbol when He said to Nicodemus: “Just as Moses *lifted up the snake* in the desert, so the *Son of Man must be lifted up*, that ever one who believes in Him may have eternal life” (Jn. 3:14). Later He said: “...when I am *lifted up* from the earth, I will draw all men to Myself” (Jn. 12:32). Obviously this “lifting up” was a prediction to His crucifixion on the cross.

While God gave the Israelites this physical symbol to look toward by faith to receive healing and life, over time they began to worship it. It became an end in itself. The bronze serpent became an *idol*. So we read that it was destroyed during the reformation of Hezekiah:

“He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had

been burning incense to it (It was called Nehushtan)” (II Kings 18:4).

The principle is this: “*What may be a helpful spiritual symbol for one generation often becomes an object of worship to the next generation.*” It ceases to be a “means to an end” and becomes an “end in itself.” The first generation focuses on the *internal spiritual reality* of the symbol while future generations focus on the *external religious symbol*. It becomes an object of veneration and worship. Soon *rites...rituals...rules...regulations* develop around it. As a result, a new *religion* is born! Then the once important *physical symbol* and corresponding spiritual reminder becomes an *idol* that stands between the people and God. It no longer points to God, it becomes god!

Principle:

“*Icons become idols because the religious symbols that are helpful for one generation become objects of worship for the next.*”

The chancel areas of many churches today around the world are filled with such “religious icons” that have the aura of the sacred and sacrosanct. These ecclesiastical “holy of holies” have become filled with revered relics of worship. They are no longer simple spiritual sign posts and symbols of our faith. They have gained mystical powers of their own! So they are encased in special gilded boxes, overlaid with gold and satin and handled with hushed reverent respect. And only the “priestly class” of the “ordained” is entitled to touch them. All others must stand their distance and only view them from afar with a sense of awe and wonder – that soon evolves into reverence and worship. Over time these religious symbols are surrounded with all of the “hails, smells and bells” of religiosity!

I have seen this same emphasis on externals in Hindu Shrines, Buddhist Temples and Islamic Mosques all over the world. It is a commonality of all religion – which Christianity is not. Since our

faith is a living and loving *relationship* with God through Christ and His indwelling Holy Spirit, external must never be allowed to become preeminent.

There is a parallel principle here to marriage. The loving *relationship* between the husband and wife must never become an empty conjugal *ritual* of just living together and “going through the motions of marriage.” For a marriage to be mutually fulfilling, there must be the constant nurture of the loving relationship that is the foundation for a growing marriage. Through the years, every married couple accumulates “tokens of love” that carry meaning for each other – especially the wife! Symbols of love become treasured keepsakes – like wedding rings...birthday gifts...vacation pictures...anniversary cards...empty perfume bottles...pressed dried flowers – each as unique and individual as the couple who treasure them.

But while the couples highly esteem these little tokens and touchstones of love, they never mistake the symbol for the reality. The loving tokens are just little “remembrances” that bring to mind their loving relationship.

God created us with this need for *physical symbols* that remind us of *spiritual realities*. That’s why Jesus gave us as His Bride the symbols of the “bread and wine.” We are to regularly come to the “Lord’s Table” in worship to remind us of Him and His sacrificial love for us. The night before He was crucified to redeem us as His earthly Bride, He broke the bread and passed the cup of wine and said: “This is My body which is broken for you; do this in *remembrance* of Me” (I Cor. 11:25).

As you probably know, the word in the Greek for “remembrance” is *anamnesis*. It means “an affectionate calling of the Person Himself to mind” – in this case the Lord Jesus (Vines Expository Dictionary, pp. 956-957). Just as it sounds, this is the word from which we get the word *amnesia*. It is a mental phenomena that means

“forgetfulness.” Amnesia results in a full or partial loss of memory as a result of a brain injury or severe emotional shock. The person awakes from a blow on the head and no longer remembers who they are. They have forgotten family members, relatives, friends, events, simple facts about their identity. Some regain their memory rather quickly, others do so over time. A few never regain their memory of who they are. They simply draw a blank about their past. They can no longer remember.

But often times, it is an encounter with spouses, family members, familiar friends, places and things that cause them to “remember again” who they are. They recall their identity and remember who they belong to.

That’s exactly what the elements of Communion are supposed to do for us. When we “forget to remember” who we are and Who we belong to, the “Lord’s Table” reminds. The “bread and wine” helps us remember that “...we are not our own; we were bought at a price” (I Cor. 6:20; 7:23; c.f. I Pet. 1:18; II Pet. 2:1).

Therefore, since we Christians often suffer temporary or long-term “spiritual amnesia,” we need to come to the Lord’s Table to remind us of *who* we are and *Whose* we are! The physical symbols of bread and wine are to “jog our memory” so we will remember that we are the Bride of Christ...that we are sanctified and set apart for Him...that we are engaged to Him...that we are not to carry on an illicit affair with the lovers of this world...that we are to be faithful unto Him...that we are awaiting His coming again for us. These are the things we so often forget through our *spiritual amnesia!* So the physical symbols of Communion are to “remind us” of these spiritual realities. But we do not worship the symbols. They are just reminders.

<p>Principle: “Because we Christians often suffer from <i>spiritual amnesia</i>,</p>
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we must come often to the Lord's Table to be reminded of who we are and Whose we are through the physical elements of the bread and wine."

The same principle applies in our relationship with God through Christ. This loving covenant relationship through the blood of Christ must never be allowed to sink to the level of external *rituals, rules* and *regulations*. When it does, it becomes dry and dead religious wineskins that are not glorifying to God, fulfilling to us or appealing to others. It is just impossible to contain the "new wine of the Spirit" in fixed and formal religious wineskins that have no flexibility. Fixed "orders of worship" and predictable "religious rituals" prescribed in the weekly bulletin soon regulate the Holy Spirit out of existence! As a result, the dynamic of the Spirit is poured out elsewhere – and we miss it.

Principle:

"Because Christianity is a *relationship* and not a *religion*, it can never be reduced to *rituals, rules* and *regulations*."

So we always must be aware of the ever-present dangers of the prominence and worship of *externals*. While certain symbols and rituals may be helpful reminders of our faith, they are only the externals. They are not the reality. Christ alone is the reality. That's why Paul said that "...in everything He might have the *supremacy*" (Col. 1:19).

(*) For a further study of this subject, see my book entitled "*Understanding Your Jewish Roots*."

CHURCH BUILDINGS:

Church buildings are a wonderful *tool* for the worship and edification of the family of God. Just like a physical family is enhanced by a physical house to live in, the spiritual family is edified by a physical house – or “church building,” to gather in. A building can be a wonderful place for both worship and fellowship. However, buildings are not a necessity for a local Body of Believers – as the First Century Church demonstrated.

Principle:

“Just as a house is helpful for the nuclear family, a church building is helpful for the spiritual family.”

CHURCHES WITHOUT BUILDINGS

Today, a church without a building is almost a contradiction in terms. It is an ecclesiastical oxymoron! It is an inconceivable concept to most pastors and Christians. But the Early Church did not have any buildings of their own for several hundred years. That fact comes as quite a shock to most Christians today who are so building-oriented. In many people’s minds, a “building-less church” is totally inconceivable. They have never known of anything other than a physical building called the “church.”

But the early Christians did not build any buildings. They did not need to. They met in the *Temple* or *Synagogues* until they were expelled by the Jews who did not want to respond to the message of the Gospel of Christ. After that rejection and expulsion, they generally met in *private homes*, or *rented buildings*. Note these examples:

- “Every day they continued to meet together in the *temple courts*. They broke bread in their *homes* and ate together with glad and sincere hearts...” (Acts 2:46)

- (In Ephesus) “Paul entered the *synagogue* and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe...So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the *lecture hall of Tyrannus*. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.” (Acts 19:8-10)

A CHURCH HOME OR HOME CHURCHES?

In his farewell discourse to the Ephesian elders from all of the house churches he had established there, he said:

“You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from *house to house*” (Acts 20:20).

While under arrest in Rome, Paul used his own rented house for ministry. His traveling companion, Doctor Luke, records:

“For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own *rented house* and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Acts 28:30-31)

In the New Testament, we also read about the many “*house churches*” that Christians met and worshipped in as their normal place of assembly:

- “Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus...Greet also the *church that meets in their house*.” (Romans 16:3-5; c.f. I Cor. 16:19)
- “Give greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the *church in her house*.” (Col. 4:15)

- “To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker...and to the *church that meets in your home.*” (Phile. 1:1-2)

THE EDIFICE COMPLEX

Much of the Western Church in Europe and America has developed what I call an “edifice complex” – always trying to build a bigger and more beautiful “church building.” In doing this, they have also created a *non-transferable mission model* of costly, elaborate, ornate church buildings that most pioneer national churches could never afford or replicate! Not only do these Western church buildings cost millions of dollars to build and maintain, but they also divert much of God’s resources away from missions, evangelism, the needs of His people and ministry to the poor.

Principle:

“The Western preoccupation with costly church buildings has created a non-transferable mission model for most indigenous national churches.”

In a later chapter we will look in detail at the very important issue of *giving* in the church. But for now I only want to point out an important principle from the New Testament about this subject of “building buildings.” The point is this: *the New Testament is totally silent about “church buildings.”* The one thing that is noticeably absent in all of the many teachings and exhortations about giving is *a total lack of emphasis on giving to build buildings.* This is in stark contrast to our day when one of the top reasons that Christians are exhorted to give is for the “building fund!”

Principle:

“The New Testament is totally silent about building church buildings.”

How did such a radical shift in emphasis take place from their day to ours? Let's hit the pause button in our study and go back to the Bible for a brief refresher course in both history and theology.

Since the First Century Church primarily met in the Temple, synagogues or homes, there was little or no giving that was directed toward buildings. Plenty of buildings already existed for the rapidly growing New Testament Church. And you will remember how it began with 3,000 converts on the Day of Pentecost – and that number soon doubled and tripled. So unlike us today, they did not have to start a “building campaign” right after Pentecost! It never crossed their minds to begin thinking about “building a building” for the church to meet in. Nor did they immediately appoint a “building committee” to start collecting money and pledges for the construction of the “First Church of Jerusalem!”

No, that was not their mentality at all. They clearly understood that “the church” was the “people of God.” She was the “new Israel” that had replaced the “old Israel” (Matt. 21:43). Therefore, the church was not a *place* or a piece of *property*, the church was a *people*. She was a *bride* rather than a *building*!

Principle:

“In the New Testament, the church was a *people* not a *place*.
She was the *Bride* and not a *building*.”

THE OLD TESTAMENT CHURCH

It is certainly true that the Old Testament saints were exhorted to give for the building of an “earthly dwelling” for God. First, they were instructed by Moses to give for the building of the *Tabernacle* – what Stephen called the “Church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:37). It was the forerunner of the *Temple* – the most expensive building ever built by man in that day. The majority of the funds and

materials were accumulated by King David. But the first Temple was built by his son, Solomon – thus the name “Solomon’s Temple.” But even Solomon knew that God “...does not live in houses made by men” (I Kings 8:27; Acts 7:48; 17:24). A spiritual fact that we need to remind ourselves of from time to time with our building preoccupation!

So while the Old Testament saints had a “Temple mentality,” the New Testament emphasis was radically different – and for a good reason. Let’s remind ourselves of why.

THE JESUS TEMPLE

All through the Old Testament, every aspect of the Tabernacle in the wilderness and the Temple in Jerusalem – all pointed to Christ. Every aspect right down to the most minute of details, all prefigured the Lord Jesus (Ex. 25:40; Acts 7:44; Heb. 8:5). They were the *shadow*, He was the *substance*. They were the *promise*, He was the *fulfillment*. They were the *physical symbols*, He was the *spiritual reality*. That’s why He could speak of “His body” as the true Temple that would be torn down through crucifixion and yet raised back up in just three days (Jn. 2:19-22).

That is also why the writer of Hebrews said that Jesus was the true tabernacle...the true sanctuary...the true Heavenly High Priest (Heb. 8:1-5). And it was “His flesh” that was prefigured by the heavy curtain in the Temple that cut off and guarded the “Holy of Holies” where God dwelt over the Mercy Seat – which the High Priest could only enter one time a year on the high Day of Atonement. So when Jesus died on the cross, that Temple curtain was “...torn in two from top to bottom” (Matt. 27:51), symbolizing that this was the work of God and not of man. As a result, a “...new and living way opened for us through the *curtain*, that is *His body*.” And it is only through the “blood of Jesus” that we can pass through that torn curtain into the Holy of Holies of God’s presence (Heb. 9:22; 10:19-22). That means that *religion* is over and living *relationship* has begun!

GOD'S TEMPLE TODAY

And wonder of wonders, every Believer is also “God’s Temple” and “God’s Sanctuary” where He dwells now through His Holy Spirit (I Cor. 3:16; 6:19; II Cor. 6:16). So there is no longer any need for physical tabernacles or temples – Christians are it! There is no longer any need to build “sanctuaries” because Christians are it! There is no longer a need for a “Holy of holies” because Christians are the dwelling place of God through His Spirit! Hallelujah!

Is it any wonder then, why there is so little emphasis in the New Testament on “building buildings” that are called tabernacles... temples...synagogues...churches...or sanctuaries?! The *people of God* are the *House of God*. Christians are “God’s building,” as Paul reminded the young Christians of his day (I Cor. 3:9). And while the Jerusalem Temple was stationary and unmovable, God’s temples today are constantly “on the move” because God is “on the move!” Wherever we go, He goes. Wherever we dwell, He dwells. Wherever we reside, His glory is manifest!

Principle:

“The body of the Christian is the Body of Christ.
Believers are the temple, sanctuary and Holy of holies
where God dwells through His Spirit.”

IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE CHURCH

How we need to return to this New Testament paradigm and principle when it comes to buildings. That’s because it is absolutely impossible for men to “build a church.” Only God can “build a church” through His Spirit – which He started on the Day of Pentecost and continues to build to this very day and hour all over the world! As Paul said:

“You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a *holy temple* in the Lord. And *in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit*” (Eph. 3:19-22).

Likewise Peter wrote and reminded the Christians of his day about their spiritual identity as the true church of God:

“You, like *living stones* are being built into a *spiritual house* to be a *holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God*, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but *now you are the people of God*” (I Pet. 2:5-10).

What a timely reminder about our true spiritual identity! Much of the church today has lost her identity because Christians have an “identity crisis.” They have forgotten *who* they are, *whose* they are – and *Who* dwells in them. They have lost sight of what the true church really is – and it is NOT a building!

So once we “build buildings” and label them the “church” – we confuse the physical with the spiritual. We become spiritual schizophrenics. We mistake *buildings* for *people*. We fall into the mind-set of “going to church” rather than “being the church.” We start giving our money to “build buildings” rather than to “build people.” Then for years to come we continue to give for *maintenance* rather than for *men* – usually at the expense of *missions* locally and globally! While the Western church raises and spends billions of dollars annually to “build buildings,” they give pennies in comparison to the local and global mission of the church

– evangelism, discipleship, ministry to the poor and needy and social justice.

Principle:

“Christians do not ‘go to church’ because they ‘are the church.’
Christian leaders are to emphasize ‘building people’
rather than ‘building buildings.’”

HOMELESS CHRISTIANS

Like in every other area of Christian living and giving, we need *Biblical balance* here. As I said earlier in this chapter, a *physical building* can be a very helpful tool for the church. Just like a *physical home* is helpful for a family, a *physical building* is helpful for the family of God. *Homelessness* in either case is not a healthy condition to raise a family in. Some kind of “shelter” is needed for the family to live and grow in. So whether it is the *nuclear family* or *spiritual family*, a “physical house” is a very helpful tool. But when it comes to the church, a building is just that – a *tool* and not a *temple*.

Therefore, just like you can have a “house” that is not really a “home,” you can have “building” that is not really a “church.” It takes a legitimate marriage and love to make a *house* into a *home*. The same is true for the “family of God.”

It has been my joy and privilege to raise the money for building hundreds of “church buildings” around the world. As a result, the family of God has generally grown and prospered “...from strength to strength in the Lord” (Ps. 84:7). Scores of those churches have planted daughter and grand-daughter churches of their own. Then helped them construct a building of their own to meet in. In most all of these situations, the “church building” has been a wonderful facility for the local family of God in that area.

UNDERGROUND CHURCHES

However, in some areas that are hostile to the Gospel, those “church buildings” have been burned and destroyed. In many “closed countries” of the world, you cannot build a building and call it a “church.” To do so is to invite trouble and opposition. In those situations, a “church building” becomes a “lightning rod” and focal point for hatred and hostility. The building becomes an easy place to attack and destroy. So in those situations, the only possibility is for the church to be “underground” and meet secretly in homes, forests or open places that do not invite nearly as much scrutiny and hostility.

It has been my joy through the years to meet and fellowship with many such “underground churches.” But in many countries I cannot do so because my presence and participation as a “white foreigner” is easily identified. I stand out like a sore thumb! So my identification and involvement in any way would quickly put the local Christians in danger. But where I have been able to secretly and quietly visit my brothers and sisters in these situations, it has been some of the greatest spiritual experiences of my life! I am always so awed and humbled by their commitment and joy in the midst of constant opposition and persecution. I am always challenged in my faith by being surrounded by theirs.

We can see then, that a “building does not make a church.” Even in those situations where the Christians are not allowed to have any buildings at all or openly worship, the church can still be strong and vibrant. In fact, many are much stronger spiritually than those in other countries that have the freedom to meet openly in “church buildings.”

We must remember then that the “house church” and “underground church” is a spiritual phenomena that has gone on every since the First Century Church. While the early Christians “...enjoyed the favor of all the people” for a while (Acts 2:47), it did not last long! Soon their rapid growth produced conflict with the existing order of things in both the religious and political realms. They fell into

religious disfavor with the Jews and *political disfavor* with the Romans. And as they spread outside of Judea, they soon fell into disfavor with both the Greeks and Gentiles. As a result, they had to increasingly meet secretly in caves and catacombs. But God was still with them – with or without a church building.

NOMADIC CHURCHES

But there is another situation where a “church building” is almost impossible and impractical. That is working among nomadic people around the world. There are hundreds of people groups around the world that are mobile...wanderers...gypsies – who are constantly “on the move.” There are millions of them! And they never stay in one place long. They are literally “here today and gone tomorrow!” So the Western mentality of “build and they will come” is totally unrealistic. To build a permanent “church building” for these nomadic people would be totally impractical and unworkable. I know because I have tried!

I have worked for years in both Africa and Asia among some of these nomadic tribal groups who are constantly “on the move” – primarily because of their cattle. In some places we have helped build a simple “church building.” But they may be there one or two weeks or months – then they are gone. All it takes is a drought to “send them packing” to other areas where there is water and grass. Then during those times, your “church building” sits empty! That’s not very wise stewardship of God’s resources.

So in those transient situations, missionaries, evangelists and church planters have to be much more creative, flexible, adaptable and dynamic. They have to adapt the church to the needs of the people they are seeking to reach. A church building of “bricks and mortar” is just not practical. In those situations we need to re-examine and re-learn a principle of church planting from the Old Testament.

As you will recall, the Tabernacle in the wilderness was totally mobile because it was a large tent. So when God moved, the people could “pull up stakes” and move with Him! The church can be the same way wherever and whenever necessary. God’s presence is not relegated to any single place on the entire globe! He is eternally omnipresent everywhere. So He can meet with His people *anywhere...anytime...under any circumstances* – with or without a building!

BUILDING BUILDINGS OR BUILDING PEOPLE?

So whenever buildings are needed and built, the emphasis should be on *simplicity* – not on being *ornate*, and *elaborate*. The goal should be to be *functional* – not *fancy*. And the buildings should be compatible with the *context* and *culture of the local surroundings*. Above all, the emphasis needs to be on “building people” rather than on “building buildings.” I

Principle:

“Church buildings should be constructed in the indigenous context of the local culture and conditions so it will not look foreign.”

We must never forget then, that it is always far easier to build a physical building than to build the people of God to the “...measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-13). That’s the highest calling of authentic church leaders. So to that end, let me close this chapter with the Apostle Paul’s personal testimony as an evangelist, church planter, discipler and mentor:

“Now I rejoice in what was *suffered for you*, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of *His body*, which is the *church*. I have become its *servant* by the commission God gave me to *present to you the word of God in its fullness* – the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make know among the

Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is *Christ in you, the hope of glory*.

We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, *so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ*. To this end I *labor*, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me” (Col. 1:24-29).

That’s our commission then as church leaders – whether in the First World or Two-Thirds World...whether in the First Century or Twenty-First Century...whether in primitive situations or sophisticated ones...whether in pioneer churches or in old established ones... whether with First Generational Believers or older Christians... whether with the nomadic or the stationary...whether in peace or persecution...whether with the educated or uneducated...whether with the rich or the poor...whether with the high or the low – whether *with buildings* or *without buildings!* Our highest calling and greatest fulfillment is to “...*proclaim Him*, admonishing and teaching with all wisdom, SO THAT we may present everyone *perfect in Christ!*

Our prayer then, should be the same as Paul’s: “To Him be *glory in the church* and *in Christ Jesus* throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen!” (Eph. 3:21).

-5-

CHURCH WORSHIP:

Tragically, *worship is one of the great dividers of Christians*. What should unify us so often divides us. That’s because worship is so different and dynamic. It seems that *worship is different things to different people*. What is *worship* for some is *worldly* to others! So

what constitutes authentic “Biblical worship” is a hotly contended subject among Christians.

If you ask a group of Christians what worship is to them, you will usually get very different answers – most of which will be very *experientially* based. Their definition of meaningful worship will be largely colored by their *temperament* and *tradition*. And most of the ones you survey would be hard pressed to give “chapter and verse” from the Bible to justify their definition of worship! So for most people, worship is a very *subjective* personal matter that has a lot to do with *taste* and *preference*.

But the primary question always is: “*What does the Bible say?*” So let’s seek a Biblical definition.

The primary word in the Old Testament for worship is *hawa*. It basically means “to bow down.” A good example is Psalm 95:6: “Come, let us *bow down* in worship, let us *kneel* before the Lord our Maker.” Obviously this “bowing down...kneeling...prostrating” is a sign of respect and humility in God’s presence.

The primary New Testament word is similar. It is the word *proskyneo*. It comes from two words: *pros*, meaning “toward,” and *kuneo*, meaning “to kiss.” So it not only means to “bow down,” it also means “to kiss toward.” In one sense then, worship is humbly “kissing God.” Without sounding irreverent, worship is spiritually “making love to God” through our words, songs, prayers, adoration and praise! More about that later.

Principle:

“Worship is humbly expressing our love and adoration to God through our payers and praise.”

INDIGENOUS WORSHIP

It is my opinion then, from both my study of Scriptures and my extensive travel in the world, that worship is a very dynamic experience and expression. As we saw above, there are many personal and cultural factors that condition and color worship for people. Therefore, the *music, liturgy, and style of worship* of a local church should arise out of what the Holy Spirit inspires in the Body of Christ in that locality. It should not be imported or imposed from without.

Whereas an *indigenous church* may study and learn from the *styles of worship, music, hymnology, methodology, technology, etc.*, of older churches in different parts of the world – they should not try to *copy* or *imitate* them. They should let the Holy Spirit guide them in the inspiration of music and worship that is appropriate to their country, culture and context.

Principle:

“The national church should let the Holy Spirit inspire indigenous forms of worship rather than copy and imitate foreign ones.”

From my own personal experience, there is nothing more awkward or unnatural than Africans, Asians, South Americans or people from the Caribbean trying to “worship white” and sing the “Old Songs of Zion!” Hymns and Gospel songs written in the Sixteenth Century by Europeans often do not “sing well” in other countries and cultures. While those songs may have good Biblical content and carry great spiritual meaning to Europeans and Americans, they do not necessarily relate the same way to people from a completely different cultural milieu who speak totally different languages and dialects.

Also, songs that were originally composed to be sung with Western musical instruments like pipe organs, harpsichords, pianos and orchestras – do not sing well acappella or with the accompaniment of simple hand-clapping, the beating of a native drum, the shaking

of a home-made tambourine or the local rhythm of a coconut maraca!

Much of Western hymnology was written for people who read music, have trained voices and can sing four part harmony. But the musical timbre, tones, rhythm, syncopation, intonation – is often totally different from culture to culture. So to just translate “our hymns” into their local language and musical forms usually does not work well! Singing “our songs” is just as awkward to them as singing “their songs” is to us. Either way, it often comes across as the proverbial donkey trying to sing opera!

So under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, national Christians must compose their own indigenous forms of praise, worship and singing. They must translate the themes of the Bible into their local musical forms and genre.

THE ORDER OF WORSHIP

It is interesting and instructive to note how dynamic and yet undefined worship is in the Bible. You are hard pressed to find any specific *definition of worship*. You will find different elements of worship mentioned including activities like singing, dancing, shouting, bowing down, praying, kneeling, prostrating, weeping, lifting of hands, waving palm branches, laying on of hands, anointing with oil, giving, sacrificing – but with no clear “Order of Worship.” The Bible portrays a *dynamic* in worship that defies human rituals, rules or regulation. Worship is also a very individual and *personal experience* with different expressions being appropriate at different times and under different circumstances. So we just cannot contain and control authentic Spirit-led worship! It is largely out of our control.

Principle:

“Because worship is spiritually dynamic, it cannot be controlled by humanly imposed rituals, rules and regulations.”

Therefore, as Christians we just have to be “baptized in the Spirit” and “filled with the Spirit,” as the Bible teaches (Acts 1:5; 2:4; I Cor. 12:13; Eph. 5:18). Only then can we “*walk* in the Spirit...*sing* in the Spirit...*pray* in the Spirit” (I Cor. 14:15; Gal. 5:25; Jude 20).

The closest thing we have to an “*Order of Worship*” in the New Testament are these words of instruction by the Apostle Paul:

- “When you come together, everyone has a *hymn*, or a *word of instruction*, a *revelation*, a *tongue* or an *interpretation*. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the Church...For God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (I Cor. 16:26, 33).
- “Speak to one another with *psalms*, *hymns* and *spiritual songs*. *Sing* and *make music* in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19).

These verses teach us that when the early church “came together” for worship, there was a dynamic involved with a lot of room for individual participation and expression. Unlike so much of our ordered church worship today in the West, theirs was not a worship that was highly structured and orchestrated by a bulletin. Nor was it directed and dominated by a select few people who were “ordained” and professional “full time ministers.” *Everyone was considered to be a minister*. So there was the preparation and expectation of individual participation. Paul instructed that “everyone” come prepared to offer a “...*hymn*, a *word of instruction*, a *revelation*, a *tongue*, an *interpretation*.”

However, there was also to be an *other-orientation* in their worship. Everything was to be done for the “strengthening of the church” – not just for individual edification. And while there was no further “Order of Worship” given, there was not to be *disorder* because God is not the Author of confusion but of peace.

Principle:

“Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, there must be a balance of ‘order in worship’ and ‘ardor in worship.’”

What a difference it would make in most of our church worship in the West if this dynamic of worship was rediscovered – like in the church in the Developing Countries. There everyone is a *participator* rather than a *spectator* –like in the First Century Church.

WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH

When it comes to worship, Jesus taught that God was looking for two primary realities:

“...the time is coming and has now come when the *true worshipers* will worship the Father in *spirit* and *truth*, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in *spirit* and in *truth*.” (John 4:23-24)

These verses remind us of several guiding principles about worship...

First, not all worship or worshipers are the same. Because there is *one* “true religion” and *many* “false religions,” there is also “true worship” and “false worship.” That means that there are “true worshipers” and “false worshipers.” It was true in Christ’s day and it is true in our day.

Principle:

“Because there is ‘true religion’ and ‘false religion,’ there is also ‘true worship’ and ‘false worship.’”

Sadly, there is a growing spirit of *universalism* being believed and propagated widely today that states: “All religions are in essence the same.” If you are sincere, they will all get you to God. We are

told on every hand that: “All roads lead to the top of the mountain where God dwells.” It matters not whether it is the Animist road... Hindu Road...Buddhist road...Jewish road...Moslem road...or Christian road. They are all going in the same general spiritual direction and will ultimately reach the same final destination. We are being told that all religions will one day bring you into God’s presence – whether you are a theist...deist...polytheist...monotheist – or even an atheist! All religions will ultimately get you to God. Therefore, any and all sincere worship is acceptable to God and equally valid.

This belief in the universal “fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man” sounds good – but it is just not true or possible – philosophically or theologically! One of the primary tenants of philosophy states: “*Things that are not equal to the same thing cannot be equal to each other.*” Obviously then...

- *Hot* and *cold* are not the same
- *Fire* and *ice* are not the same
- *Black* and *white* are not the same
- *Truth* and *error* are not the same
- *Right* and *wrong* are not the same
- *Pain* and *pleasure* are not the same
- *Ecstasy* and *agony* are not the same
- *Victory* and *defeat* are not the same
- *North* and *south* are not the same
- *Up* and *down* are not the same
- *Right* and *left* are not the same
- *Light* and *darkness* are not the same
- *Life* and *death* are not the same
- *God* and the *devil* are not the same
- *Heaven* and *hell* are not the same

These are all *opposite* and *opposing* realities. It is Buddhism that teaches that the difference between these opposites is nothing more than *maya*, or *illusion*. Neither the Bible, empirical evidence

or human experience confirms this logical contradiction. With apologies to my Buddhist friends, these eternal opposites are not at all equal to each other. Nor are they just different words describing the same truths. Webster defines truth as: “That which corresponds to reality.” And the realities of these opposites are obvious to even the most casual observer – even a child.

The same is true in the realm of religion and worship. It is obvious to anyone who is not totally blind spiritually, that *all religions are not equal* and *all worship is not equally valid*. When religions teach opposite things about the gods or goddesses they believe in, they cannot all be teaching the same truths. For example...

- What an animist believes about spirits dwelling in all things is vastly different from what Jews believe about a transcendent God.
- What polytheistic Hindu idol worshipers believe about their pantheon of gods and goddesses is totally different from what Moslems believe about a monotheistic Allah.
- What Buddhist believe about their impassionate Enlightened One who has reached nirvana – or nothingness, is totally contrary to the Judeo-Christian belief in a physical resurrection and personal existence in heaven for all eternity.
- What Christians believe about the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ as “God-in-human-flesh” and the *only way* to God is an eternity apart from the Gnostic belief in a duality that does not permit God to become incarnate or personally knowable.

We could go on and on with such obvious religious contradictions. But the point is clear. Not all gods are the same...not all religions are the same...not all worship is the same.

TRUE WORSHIP AND FALSE WORSHIP

So the reality is not that there is little or no worship in the world today. Because man is *innately religious*, he is also an *incurable worshipper*. He *must* worship someone or something. Try as he

may, man just cannot keep from worshipping! That's why archaeologists and anthropologists have never found a people in history that did not have some form of religion and worship. The only question is whether or not they were "true worshipers" or "false worshipers" – meaning were they worshipping the true and living God or false gods and goddesses.

Principle:

"Because man is *innately religious*, he is an *incurable worshiper*. If he goes not know of the true God, he will worship false gods."

The Bible condemns every form of idolatry because *every idol tells a lie about the true and living God* (Ex. 20:4). That's because God is not exactly *like* anything He has created. So to try and make some *image* or *likeness* of Him is not only impossible – it is also blasphemous! It is a religious lie. It is a spiritual hoax. It is misguided faith. It is *false worship*.

In describing most of the Jewish worship of His day, Jesus repeated the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"These people honor me with their lips but *their hearts are far from Me*. *They worship Me in vain*; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Isa. 29:13; Mk. 7:6-7).

Jesus pointed out then, that true worship is a *heart issue*. While man looks on the outward appearance, *God looks on the heart* (1 Sam. 16:7). That means that the *heart of worship* is the *heart of the worshipper*. So while people may go through all of the outward motions of religion and worship and "draw close to God" physically through their prescribed rituals and formulas – God is looking at their hearts. If their hearts are "far from Him" through sin, rebellion and disobedience, no amount of religion or worship will compensate. Their religiosity will neither find favor with God nor will it bring fulfillment and assurance to themselves. All of the religious

fervor will be nothing more than a “resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” before God (I Cor. 13:1)!

Principle:

“The heart of worship is the heart of the worshiper.”

Also, as the Apostle Paul pointed out, true worship must be consistent with the *nature of God* – which is *agape love*. That’s why he said that no degree of worship or sacrifice will compensate for a lack of love for God and love for man. “If I give all my possessions to the poor,” Paul wrote, “and surrender my body to be burned, *but have not love, I gain nothing*” (I Cor. 13:3). So love for God and love for our brothers and sisters in Christ are to be the two most important defining marks of our worship. That’s why Jesus summarized all of the other Commandments of God into these two: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul with all of your mind and with all your strength*”...and “*Love your neighbor as yourself*” (Matt. 22:37-38; Mk. 12:31; c.f. Deut. 6:4).

It is important to point out again that the normative New Testament word for worship means to “kneel” and to “kiss toward.” Worship then, is a turning away from our illicit love affair with the world and all of its seductive idols – to the worship of the one true God. It is “falling in love with God” with “...all your heart, soul, mind and strength.” That means that authentic worship is *loving God spiritually, physically, willfully, emotionally and mentally*. It is worshipping God with the *totality of your being*.

Principle:

“Authentic worship involves our spirit, soul and body.
It is loving God with the totality of our whole being.”

Therefore, worship is to increasingly engage every faculty of our personhood – with *love* being our motivation and *truth* being our foundation. Authentic worship produces a growing sense of what

the Bible calls the *reverential fear of God*. And that reverential fear results in a sense of awe, wonder, respect, humility, gratitude, obedience, holy living (Deut. 6:13; 10:14; Ps. 2:11; Prov. 1:7; Acts 2:43; II Cor. 5:11; Phil. 2:12; Rev. 14:7, etc).

John expressed the origin of love this way: “We love because *He first loved us*” (I Jn. 4:19). And it is that love *from* God that results in our love *for* God – which manifests itself in an *agape love for your neighbor*. So our *horizontal love for our neighbor* is the proof of our *vertical love for God!* One cannot exist without the other. We prove that we love God by practically loving our neighbors – beginning with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Therefore, without God’s *Spirit, truth and love*, all of our worship will be nothing more than the “form of godliness” without the transforming power of God (II Tim. 3:5). That means that while all religion has a lot of “god-talk” and “religious activity,” the hearts of the people have not been transformed by the Spirit, truth and love of God. Their religion and worship – regardless of how dedicated, sincere or sacrificial – are not from God but are based solely on the “teachings of men.” So their religion and worship are “in vain.”

But the Bible does not stop with the teaching and traditions of men when it comes to the origin of religion. Both the Old and New Testament make it crystal clear that *behind every false religion and idol there are demons*. When Moses condemned the idolatry of the children of Israel, he said that they...

“...abandoned the God who made them and they made (God) jealous with their foreign gods and angered Him with their detestable idols. They *sacrificed to demons* which are not God” (Deut. 32:15-17).

The Psalmist described their times of apostasy with similar words:

“...they mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. They worshiped their idols which became a snare to them. *They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons*” (Ps. 106:35-37).

The Apostle Paul was even clearer in identifying the animating spiritual forces behind all idolatry as the devil and his demons:

“...*the sacrifice of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons*” (I Cor. 10:20).

Paul clearly understood that while people might be the human front and face of religion – the devil is the ultimate originator and animator. Just like the Holy Spirit is the inspiration for the Christian faith, the unholy spirits are the inspiration for all pagan religions. God is the power behind one; Satan is the power behind all of the others.

Principle:

“God’s Holy Spirit is the inspiration and power behind the church; Satan and his unholy spirits are the inspiration and animation behind all pagan religions and philosophies.”

Satan is the great religious contender with God for the worship of man. That’s why his ultimate temptation was to get Jesus to worship him in exchange for the whole world – which Satan was prepared to deliver the moment Jesus bowed down to him (Lk. 4:5-7). And while Jesus would not bow down and worship Satan, he is still getting the worship he craves all over the world through every “pagan religion” – whether it is Animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Taoism or Islam!

But it does not stop with paganism. Satan is also receiving worship through man’s many forms of “secular religion” with its many deities

of “enlightenment” – like humanism, naturalism, secularism, scientism, materialism, hedonism. It matters not to Satan whether he is worship through the darkness of voodoo or the enlightenment of humanism. In either religious extreme he gets the worship – not God!

Principle:

“Because Satan’s supreme lust is for the worship of man, he is the originator and animator behind all religions.”

Therefore, Just like the ancient Jews often adopted the religion and customs of the people around them, the early church struggled with the same temptation. They tried to play both sides of the spiritual fence. They fell into the trap of *religious pluralism* and *political expediency*. They wanted their church to be *inclusive* rather than *exclusive*. They sought to make a place at the Lord’s table for pagan worship. But in the face of this creeping religious tolerance, Paul drew a clear spiritual line in the sand. He made a stark contrast between true and false worship for these naïve accommodating Christians who were trying to mix spiritual oil and water.

“You cannot drink the *cup of the Lord* and the *cup of demons* too; you cannot have a part in both the *Lord’s table* and the *table of demons*” (1 Cor. 10:20-21).

With similar severe words, Paul wrote a second letter to exhort the carnal saints at Corinth to stop trying to mingle paganism with purity:

“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do *righteousness* and *wickedness* have in common? Or what fellowship can *light* have with *darkness*? What harmony is there between *Christ* and *Belial* (the devil)? What does a *believer* have in common with an *unbeliever*? What

agreement is there between the *temple of God* and *idols*? For we are the temple of the living God” (II Cor. 6:14-16).

Paul clearly understood then, that *paganism* in any and every form *perverts spiritual purity and power*. They could not coexist. They could not be yoked together. They could not worship together. They could not fellowship together. They could not intermarry. That’s because Christians cannot simultaneously sit at the “Lord’s Table” and eat at the “table of demons.” They cannot drink from the “cup of the Lord” and the “cup of demons” at the same time. It is a spiritual impossibility!

However, millions of Christians around the world are still trying to do just that. Like the ancient Jews and early Christians, they too are trying to accommodate the church to the paganism of the world around them. Rather than striving to be the exclusive “temple of the living God,” they are seeking to be spiritually tolerant and politically correct. They are seeking to conform the church to the spirit of the age. And in the process they are losing their “salt” and “light.” Is it any wonder that they are dying from the disease of spiritual compromise?

Principle:

“Any and every form of religious paganism perverts the spiritual purity and power of the church.”

These are sobering revelations and reminders from God’s Word that need to be heard and heeded by the church in the face of the *spiritual universalism*, *religious eclecticism* and *theological ecumenism* of our day!

FREEDOM AND FORM

Secondly, according to Jesus there must be a balance between *freedom* and *form* in our worship. Biblical “truth” is the *form* while the “spirit” gives the *freedom*. When Jesus made this declaration

about worship, He was echoing the words of David in Psalm 145:18: “The Lord is near to all who call on Him, to all who *call on Him in truth*.” So there must be a *balance* in worship between the *objective* and the *subjective*...between the *expositional* and the *experiential*...between the *external witness of the Word* and the *internal witness of the spirit*.

Principle:

“Authentic Biblical worship is a balance between *Spirit* and *truth*, between *form* and *freedom*, between the *subjective* and *objective*.”

However, when it comes to worship, we Christians are a victim of the pendulum. We seem to swing from one extreme to the other! Christian history has shown that one radical swing of the pendulum eventually produces the opposite extreme over time. As a result, some Christians err on the side of *too much form* – while others err on the side of *too much freedom*. We have the *liturgists* on one side and the *libertarians* on the other. One side calls for more *order* while the other cries out for more *ardor!* What is needed is a *Biblically balanced worship* that is a mixture of both where “... everything is done in a fitting and orderly way” because “God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (I Cor. 14:33; 40).

WORSHIP 24/7

However, the emphasis in the New Testament is on a *lifestyle of worship* – not a *liturgy of worship*. Note these helpful verses about authentic worship that pleases and glorifies God.

- “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a *living sacrifice*, holy and pleasing to God – this is your *spiritual act of worship*” (Romans 12:1).
- “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, *do it all for the glory of God*” (I Cor. 10:31).

- “Whatever you do, *work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord*...It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Col. 3:23-24).

So authentic spiritual worship is not something we *do* for an hour on Sunday morning between 11:00 AM and 12:00 noon. *Worship is to be the life-style of the Christian – 24/7.* We worship through the work of our hands as well as through the songs and prayers of our lips. Authentic Biblical worship breaks down the barrier between “sacred” and “secular.” Worship increasingly becomes the air we breathe. That’s why Paul exhorted us to “...pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17).

Principle:

“The Biblical emphasis is on a *lifestyle of worship* rather than a *liturgy of worship*.

True spiritual worship breaks the barrier of *sacred and secular.*”

Some of the most exciting and dynamic worship is taking place today in the church in the Two-Thirds World. In those pioneer first generational churches, there is an enthusiasm, spontaneity and power demonstrated that is not often experienced in the church in the First World. In America much of our worship is very sophisticated and cerebral. Every detail of the service is carefully planned in advance. Every moment of the “worship hour” is carefully orchestrated by the “Order of Worship.” There is little or no room for the Holy Spirit to manifest Himself and His gifts through the worshipers. Most of the time nothing is engaged but our minds. Our hearts and emotions have been tamed and subdued.

By contrast, many of our brethren in other countries worship from the “top of their heads to the soles of their feet!” Every part of them is engaged in the worship experience. Both the inner man and outer man participate. You see and hear both their *soul* and their

soles expressing themselves! That's why I love preaching in those places because they enter in and help me preach the sermon!

Therefore, worship in the younger churches in the Developing World often has a reckless abandonment of self as the people enter into worship. There is joyful singing, dancing, kneeling, prostrating, lifting of hands, weeping, shouting, simultaneous praying aloud, laying on of hands, casting out of demons. Through it all there is an awesome presence and power of God!

So worship is another area where the indigenous national churches have so much to offer the church in the West. While they may need some of our teaching and tradition, we desperately need an infusion of their spiritual vitality, joy, hope, celebration – and passionate love of God in reckless abandonment of self!

-6-

CHURCH GIVING

Giving is another crucial area where the indigenous national church must increasingly demonstrate her autonomy. That's because *giving* is to become the life-style of every maturing Christian – whether they live in the First Century or Twenty-First Century. And it matters not whether a Christian lives in *prosperity* or *poverty*, giving on every level is to become the motive and motivation of their lives. The Bible clearly reveals that *God is a giving God*. The Lord Jesus Himself said: “It is more *blessed to give* than to receive” (Acts 20:35). So the *blessed life* is a *benevolent life*.

THE GIVING GOD

The familiar verse that succinctly summarizes the Gospel expresses this truth about giving: “For God so loved the world that He *gave* His only begotten Son...” (Jn. 3:16). When any person is impacted by this spiritual truth, it has to transform their view of money, materialism and giving! Therefore, *every Christian is to become a giving Christian* – regardless of *how much* or *how little* they are able to give. Just like we saw that *worship* was to become the life-style of every Christian, *giving* is also to become a part of that transformed life-style. It is one of the distinguishing marks of an authentic Christian life.

Simply put, the principle is this: “Because God is a *giving God*, Christians are to be a *giving people*. Some Christians have been blessed by God with the resources to “...*give generously*” (Romans 12:8). Others are only able to *give sacrificially*, like the poor widow

whom Jesus commended for her incredible faith (Luke 21:1-4). But all Christians are to be taught the *grace of giving* so they can experience the *joy of giving* (II Cor. 8:7; 9:7).

Principle:

“Because God is a giving God, Christians must be giving people.”

In addition, it is only through a life of *consistent giving* that a person can break the tyranny of money and materialism in their lives. And the more systematically they give – whether it is money, cows, chickens or vegetables, the freer they become from the “love of money” and the control of material things. The issue is not so much *what* a person gives – but *that* they give from the resources they have that God has entrusted to them.

NEW TESTAMENT GIVING

In the New Testament Church, the disciples gave “...each according to his *ability*...” (Acts 11:29). Obviously not all could give the same amount. But all were expected to give in proportion to how God had given to them. As God had blessed them, each one was expected to be a blessing to others in need.

When it came to “taking an offering” for the needy saints, Paul gave these instructions:

“Now about the *collection for God’s people*: Do what I told the Galatian Churches to do. On the first day of every week, *each one of you* should set aside a sum of money *in keeping with his income*, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made” (I Cor. 16:1-2).

When we carefully break-down these two verses, we can see at least 7 important principles about giving that was taught and

practiced in the Early Church. Paul reminded them that their giving was to be...

- Purposeful: “*Now about the collection for God’s people...*”
- Practiced: “*Do what I told the Galatian Churches to do...*”
- Perpetual: “*...on the first day of every week...*”
- Personal: “*...each one of you should...*”
- Planned: “*...set aside a sum of money...*”
- Proportional: “*...in keeping with his income...*”
- Prepared: “*...saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made*”

As we can see from this passage, Paul was not just giving his *personal opinion* about giving to the saints in Corinth. He was giving them the general pastoral instruction he taught to the Christians in Galatia and in the other churches he had planted. And because his instructions were inspired by the Holy Spirit, they were *authoritative*.

REASONS FOR GIVING

As I have thoroughly studied the Scriptures about giving, there are primarily 3 *purposes* for which Christians are exhorted to give. While they may give for other worthy purposes, these 3 things are to be the *priorities of their giving*. Since I have written several other longer books on this subject, let me just outline them briefly here (*).

NEEDY SAINTS

First and foremost, Paul’s teaching and personal example reminded new Christians that the primary focus for giving was for “God’s people” in need. Everywhere he traveled, Paul took up a “collection for the needy saints” – especially those living back in Jerusalem (Acts 11:29-30; 24:17; Rom. 15:25-28, 31; I Cor. 16:15; II Cor. 8:1-4; Gal. 2:10). Obviously this was practiced from the very beginning by the Early Church in Jerusalem. That’s because we read in Acts about how they generously gave for the needy among them – especially for the care and support of widows and orphans (Acts

4:32-37; 6:1-7; Ja. 1:27, etc). And they did this so effectively that it is recorded that "...there were no needy person among them" (Acts 4:34). But let's look at the rest of the story.

Unlike our day, there was no government welfare programs provided by Rome. There were no socio-economic "safety nets" to catch those who had fallen below the poverty line. So neither the Jews nor Christians could look to the government to "bail them out" in their time of need. But they didn't need to because *the family of God took care of their own*. A radical shift in priorities had taken place because of God's saving grace. If God met their spiritual need for salvation by giving His Son on the cross – how could they not give to others in need? Since God had "freely given them all things" (Rom. 8:32; I Cor. 2:12) through Christ and his Holy Spirit, *everything* they had now belonged to Him! Note these incredible words describing the agape love and compassion that the Early Church demonstrated:

"And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them...for there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles' feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need" (Acts 4:32-35)

This concern and care for the poor among them, particularly the fatherless, husbandless and aliens living among them, was a consistent carry-over from the teaching of the Old Testament. These First Century Jewish Christians knew well the words of the Lord through Moses concerning their tithes:

- "Consecrate to Me every *firstborn* male. The *first offspring* of every womb among the Israelites belongs to Me, whether man or animal" (Ex. 13:1).

- “Be sure to set aside a *tenth* of all that your fields produce each year...At the end of every three years bring all *tithes* of that year’s produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands” (Deut. 14:22, 38-29; c.f. Job 31:16-21; Ps. 146:9; Isa. 1:17-23).

FIRSTFRUIT GIVING

It is important to notice that their giving was largely a *tithe* from their “flocks and fields.” Theirs was an *agricultural economy* and a *pastoral economy*. Therefore, in their largely “cashless society,” their tithes and offerings were measured in terms of “fruit from their fields” and “flocks from their herds” – thus the principle of “firstfruit giving” (Ex. 13:1-2; 22:29; 34:19; Deut. 26:1-15; Prov. 3:9-10). They were to give to God *first* – not *last*. They were to give Him their *best* – not their *worst*. Their giving was “off the top” rather than “off the bottom.” And all of this giving was to remind them that God was the *Creator* and *Owner* of everything, while they were just the *stewards*.

This is an important principle of giving that needs to be re-taught on many mission fields of the world today where young churches have been planted among nomadic *pastoral people* and *agrarian societies*. Like the Jews of the Old Testament period, their economies are largely *cashless*. Prosperity and wealth are measured in terms of “heads of cattle” and “harvests of the fields.” So while there may not be a lot of “money in circulation” among them, there is a lot of wealth and prosperity walking around on four feet! And there is also a lot of surplus grain and vegetables privately stored-up that need to be tithed to God’s storehouse, the church!

These Christians from non-industrialized societies need to be taught to *tithe their animals and produce to God so that He can bless*

them. If they think that tithing and giving is only in terms of *money*, they will never connect their “wealth to their worship.” They will think to themselves: “*Since I have so little money, I do not have anything to tithe and give to the church.*” They will also think: “*Since the missionaries and foreigners have a lot of money, let them give to support our pastor and poor people.*” As a result of this unbiblical mentality, they will live out their Christian lives as non-tithers and non-givers. Consequently, they will miss God’s blessing upon their lives as they let others do their giving for them. They will never learn to “live by faith” and see God meet their needs. They will live a sub-standard Christian life based on *keeping* and *hoarding* rather than on *tithing* and *giving*.

Principle:

“Firstfruit giving reminds us that God desires and deserves our first and best – not our last and least left-overs.”

But in both the Old Testament and New Testament, God taught His people to tithe and develop a consistent life-style of giving. And that giving was to support their “Levites,” or pastors, as well as the needy among them – which we will look at a bit more later in this chapter.

MISSION GIVING

But there was a second thing that Paul raised money for among all of the pioneer churches he planted and that was for *evangelism* – primarily through the support of traveling Apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers (Eph. 4:11). Several times we read about Paul and other New Testament writers exhorting a particular group of Christians to receive some traveling worker to minister among them for a period of time. After that they were to “...send them on their way in a manner worthy of God” (I Cor. 16:11; III Jn. 6). That meant that they were to *give generously* in both money and material supplies so that they would “...have everything they need” (Titus 3:13).

The Apostle Paul was a “peripatetic preacher.” That means as an Apostle, he *traveled around* preaching from place to place under the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Book of Acts and his various Epistles, recount three primary missionary journeys. These three major missionary journeys took approximately 10 years and covered 6 whole provinces of the Roman Empire – basically the “whole world” of his day. Listen to his description of his itinerant ministry that he wrote to the saints in Rome – describing his mission to the Gentile world:

“I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done – by the power of signs and miracles through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the Gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the Gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation...but now there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while” (Rom. 15:17-24).

So for at least 10 years, Paul traversed the known world of his day preaching the Gospel. Obviously, travel takes money. There was no such thing as “free travel” – except when he traveled as a prisoner of Rome. Then Caesar picked up the tab for his travels and lodging in prisons and dungeons! The rest of the time Paul either “worked his way” through his tent-making, or was supported in part by the tithes and offerings of his Christian friends. And because he knew that *his work was God’s work*, Paul did not apologize for asking Christians to give for his travel expenses. He taught the young churches to be *sending churches* and *supporting*

churches. So he did not hesitate to tell them to “...assist me on *my journey*” (Rom. 15:24; II Cor. 1:16). Just like it took finances for him to get to where they were, it would take more money and material supplies to get him to the next destination on his missionary journey – which in their case was Spain. So he unashamedly asked for financial support from Christians and churches – and received it.

Principle:

“Mature churches are to be both
sending churches and supporting churches.”

Travel then, takes money – whether in the First Century or Twenty-First Century. I know from personal experience because I have also been called into the *itinerant ministry*. Rather than being called into one location like my father who was a “local pastor,” I have spent my life in the *itinerancy*. As a result, I have spent the last four decades traveling around the world teaching, preaching and mentoring as God has led and enabled. And like the Apostle Paul, all of my travel has been made possible by the prayers and partnership of God’s people. So I understand personally how crucial giving for mission travel is! And, it is something that every local church should be proactive in their giving toward – especially if they are going to be a *sending church* like the one at Antioch that sent out Paul and Barnabas.

PASTORAL SUPPORT

Thirdly, Paul also taught about the importance of each local church *giving for the support of their pastor* (I Cor. 9:1-18). The local *pastor* or *shepherd* is a New Testament equivalent to the *Levites* who ministered and served full time in the Temple. As you will recall, the Levites were not given any portion of land when God divided Canaan among the Twelve Tribes. He became their portion. And He established the *tithe* to support them. Note these words of instruction:

“The Levitical priests, the whole tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel; they shall eat the Lord’s offerings by fire and His portion. And they shall have no inheritance among their countrymen; *the Lord is their inheritance*, as He promised them. Now *this shall be the priests due from the people*, from those who offer a sacrifice, either an ox or a sheep of which they shall give to the priest the shoulder and the two cheeks and the stomach. You shall give him the *first fruits* of your grain, your new wine, and your oil, and the first shearing of your sheep. For the Lord your God has chosen him and his sons from all your tribes, to stand and serve in the name of the Lord forever” (Deut. 18:1-5; c.f. 10:9; Num. 18:20; Ezek. 44:28).

In addition to supervising and serving in the Temple – especially over the sacrificial system, they were to “teach the people” all of the laws, commands and ordinances of God (Lev. 10:10-11; Deut. 17:10-11; 33:10; Ezek. 44:23). In return, God’s people would support them from their tithes and offerings. So as the Levites gave to the people *spiritually*, the people gave back to them *materially* and *financially*. God has not changed this system of mutual reciprocal support since then. He has only done away with the system of animal sacrifice since His Son became the ultimate sacrifice “once for all” that all of these Old Testament sacrifices pointed to (Heb. 7:27; 10:10).

Principle:

“Indigenous churches must support their own pastors and teachers *financially* who minister to them *spiritually*.”

As a converted Jew, the Apostle Paul clearly understood this principle of support that God gave through Moses. So he uses it as a “proof text” that local churches should financially support their pastors and leaders:

“Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk?...for it is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.’...This was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. *If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?*...Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar have their share with the altar? So also *the Lord directed that those who proclaim the Gospel to get their living from the Gospel*” (I Cor. 9:7-14).

NO FOREIGN SUPPORT

So while we find Paul teaching the new pioneer churches to fully support their own pastors, we never find him soliciting money from the “mother church” in either Jerusalem or Antioch to support them. Just the opposite. He taught the young churches to support the needy saints back in the “mother church” in Jerusalem, as we have already seen. To that end Paul reminded the saints at Rome: “If the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ *spiritual blessing*, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their *material blessing*” (Rom. 15:27).

And in reminding the new Gentile Christians of this Old Testament principle, Paul underscored the importance of especially supporting those ministers who “taught the Word” – just like the Levites had done for the Jews of old. That’s why he emphasized that one of the most important spiritual gifts for any local elder was that he must be “able to teach” (I Tim. 3:2; II Tim. 2:24). So just as the local church elders supported the people spiritually through their teaching of the Word, the saints were to in turn support the elders materially through their tithes and offerings. Note afresh these two exhortations by Paul to young Christians about supporting their elders and pastors:

- “Anyone who receives instruction in the word must *share all good things with his instructor*” (Gal. 6:5).
- “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of *double honor*, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the scriptures says, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages’” (I Tim. 5:17-19).

The Biblical principle then is crystal clear. *It is ultimately the responsibility of every local church to fully support their pastor who shepherds them* (I Cor. 9:11; Gal. 6:6). As we have already seen, the over-arching principle for local churches is this – whether in the First World or Two-Thirds World: *“The Lord has commanded that those who preach the Gospel should receive their living from the Gospel”* (I Cor. 9:14). And note that Paul says that this is not just his idea or plan – but that *“The Lord has commanded”* this financial support.

Therefore, it is not the responsibility of the sending church or mission agency to financially support the indigenous national pastor. While they may help out in the pioneer stage for a brief period of time like Paul did (II Cor. 11:8), this is not to be a prolonged practice. That’s because continued “foreign support” will do the following...

- It teaches a *disobedience* to the Word of God and example of Christ and the Apostles
- It produces spiritual *immature* through not practicing the “grace of giving”
- It weakens their *faith* in trusting God for their needs and that of their church
- It produces *dependency* in attitude and action
- It sets a *bad example* to outsiders who see them as “rice Christians”
- It robs them of the *blessings* of God

GIVING FOR BUILDINGS

A final important principle here about giving in the New Testament. As we saw in an earlier chapter, the one thing that is noticeably absent in the various teachings and exhortations about giving is a *total lack of emphasis on giving to build buildings*. That's because the emphasis in the New Testament is *people* not *property*. This is in stark contrast to our day when one of the top reasons that Christians are exhorted to give – and even sacrifice, is for the “building fund!” And sadly, the more emphasis there is on the “building fund” the less there usually is on the “mission fund.”

Principle:

“An unhealthy spiritual imbalance is revealed in the local church when the ‘building fund’ gets more emphasis and resources than the ‘mission fund.’”

So as we saw in an earlier chapter, the overwhelming giving emphasis in the New Testament is to *build people* rather than to *build buildings*. The focus was on *people* – not *property*. The highest goal was not to build the “biggest church in town” but to build up the saints of God to the “...measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). Rather than building the tallest church steeple in town – their goal was to teach and mature Christians so that they would “stand tall” for the Lord Jesus in every area of life!

In the New Testament then, there was a major paradigm shift away from a “building mentality.” There was no longer a need for a “religious temple” since Christians became the “temple of God.” Because of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the Believer did not need to go to a “sanctuary” because he or she was the “sanctuary.” Christians did not need to “build an altar” because their heart was an altar. They did not need to “make sacrifices” because they were “living sacrifices” (Rom. 12:1). And everywhere they went they

could enjoy the “Holy of holies” because of God’s abiding presence “with them” and “in them.”

There is a little “play on words” about *church* that summarizes this principle. Who is the real church? The English word itself gives the answer. Just spell it slowly. “C-H-**U-R**-C-H.” So *who* is the church? U R! Therefore, since “you are” the church – *think like it...live like it...act like it...talk like it...love like it...work like it...use your time like it...spend your money like it!* That’s what it means to be a “living sacrifice.”

The Apostle Paul set the bar high in this area for all of us as Christian leaders when he wrote:

“So whether you *eat* or *drink* or *whatever you do*, *do it all for the glory of God*. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God – even as *I try to please everybody in every way*. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, SO THAT *they may be saved*. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (I Cor. 10:31-11:1).

Dare we live or minister any differently? Paul’s single passion was the church! Ours must be the same.

In conclusions then, the *giving of tithes and offerings* in the New Testament was not for the building of an *edifice* called the “church.” It was for what I call the “3-Es” of New Testament giving – which was for the...

- *Evangelism* of the lost
- *Edification* of needy saints
- *Equipping* of workers for ministry

I am convinced if we will make this radical shift back to the *New Testament pattern of giving*, there will be a renewed "...growth that is from the Lord" (Col. 2:19).

So for the Apostle Paul – the greatest pioneer church planter of all times, *a non-giving church was a contradiction in term*. A Christian who did not give was an anomaly and spiritual abnormality. As a believer grew in his or her faith, they were expected to *grow in their giving*. The same must be true of Christians in every authentic indigenous church anywhere in the world. And the primary purpose for their giving should be for *evangelism, edification, equipping* – which are all focused on *people*, the priority of God's heart.

For a further study on the subject of giving, see my books: *Will A Man Rob God*, *The Grace of Giving* and *Biblical Principles for Living and Giving*.

-7-

CHURCH UNITY:

Division and disunity are two of the greatest problems in the Body of Christ locally and globally. In the face of these kinds of petty human divisions in the Corinthian Church, Paul asked a penetrating question: *"Is Christ divided?"* (I Cor. 1:13). While that is a *spiritual impossibility*, it is a sad *organizational reality* worldwide. So today

we would have to answer *yes!* Sadly, *Christ is divided* into thousands of denominational and theological groups – each vying for prominence and dominance over the others.

Because this has been one of our most persistent and consistent besetting sins as Christians, I want us to conclude this study with a rather detailed look at this painful subject. Division is not only our greatest source of *shame before God* and *embarrassment before the world* – it is also our *greatest hindrance to the fulfillment of the Great Commission*. Therefore, no discussion about the nature of an indigenous church would be complete without a careful look at this subject of *division* in the Body of Christ. That’s because this problem of theological division and denominational distinctive has been transported to virtually every mission field in the world today. We have exported our *spiritual divisions* far more than our *spiritual unity!*

Principle:

“Christian division is our greatest shame before God, embarrassment before the world and hindrance to the fulfillment of the Great Commission.”

DENOMINATIONAL DIVISIONS

In an earlier chapter, we looked at how our Western Denominational divisions and theological debates have been exported all over the world – causing great confusion among national Christians. Just like the Judaizers followed Paul to “circumcise” all of the Gentiles and make them “little Jews,” Many missionaries and cross-cultural evangelists have done the same thing for generations. They have rushed into country after country with their “theological branding irons” to “rustle sheep” and bring national Christians into their denominational fold. With great zeal and passion, these

denominational champions and theologically-oriented Christians have followed the footsteps of the Pharisees who also “...traveled over land and sea to win a single convert” (Matt. 23:15)! So with their *denominational names* and *theological flags* flying high, they have gone in to “straighten out the theology” of the national leaders and bring the indigenous church into their fold!

Certainly good Bible teaching and “sound doctrine” are needed in every church around the world – including America! But in their theological zeal, these well-intentioned Christians have often assumed the place of the Holy Spirit in His role of “...guiding people into truth” (Jn. 16:13; I Jn. 2:27). And as they champion certain theological positions important to them, they subtly shift the focus from Jesus as the “Head of the church” to men. The on-going confusion and divisions this continues to create on the mission field cannot be over-emphasized.

So one of the most persistent and successful strategies of the devil toward the church worldwide has been: “Divide and conquer.” However, the devil cannot be blamed for nearly all of the divisions, schisms and splits in the church. He is not the only source of divisiveness in the church and in the world – as I pointed out above.

3 SOURCES OF DIVISION

While Satan is the great “devilish dividers,” he is only one of 3 sources of division and disunity in both the church and in the world. The Bible teaches that dissention and division may be caused by the *Savior...Satan...or self*. Let’s look at each with some helpful scriptural examples.

SAVIOR DIVISIONS

First of all, *the Lord Jesus Himself is a great source of division in the world today* – perhaps even the greatest. He was a great source of division in the First Century and has continued to be so in

every century since then. Just like His birth *divided history*, His death *divided humanity*. And His claims continue to *divide the world*. Like it or not, every human being who has ever lived will one day – in some way, have to decide about Him.

Principle:

“Jesus Christ is the most divisive person in human history. His birth divided history, His death divided humanity and His claims continue to divide the world.”

Almost as soon as He began His public ministry, *division started*. In the first few months of His ministry, His own physical family thought He had “lost His mind.” So they went to where He was teaching to “...take charge of Him” (Mk. 3:21). That means that they were going to forcibly “take Him away” and “put Him away!”

When He preached His first sermon in His hometown synagogue in Nazareth, there was similar division. We are told that many “... *spoke well of Him* and were amazed at the gracious words that came from His lips.” Others however, *took great offense at Him* because of His claims and “...were *furious*” at Him. They were so angered at His claims that they “...drove Him out of the town and took Him to the brow of the hill...in order to throw Him down the cliff. But He walked right through the crowd and went on His way” (Lk. 4:14-30).

On another occasion after His clear assertions about being the Son of God and His covenantal challenge to them to “eat His flesh and drink His blood,” many took offense. At that point we read that “... *many* of His disciples said, “This is a *hard teaching!* Who can accept it?” And as a result, “*Many* of His disciples *turned back* and *no longer followed Him*” (Jn. 6:60, 67). Note that it was not a *few* – but “*many* of His disciples who stopped following Him. So there was a major “falling away” of His disciples early in His ministry.

Also, in spite of all of His teachings, miracles, healings, signs and wonders, the religious leaders continued to turn against Him. Before long they were even calling Him “demon possessed” and the “Prince of demons” (Matt. 9:34; Mk. 3:22; Jn. 7:20). So from His earliest ministry forward, Jesus wasn’t winning any popularity contests with the religious establishment of His day.

It is obvious then, that the claims and actions of Jesus would not permit neutrality. In the face of His proactive truth, love and compassion, people had to decide about Him every where He went. They could not be passive and unresponsive to His presence. They had to *believe* or *disbelieve...have faith* or *doubt...accept* or *reject...be healed* or remain *sick...follow* or *walk away...love* or *hate...be forgiven* or *die in their sin...chose heaven* or *hell!* Indecision was just not possible.

So people were either *for Jesus* or *against Jesus*. That’s the nature of truth and love. They will just not allow you to remain neutral. It’s just impossible to be a “fence-sitter” in the face of claims like Jesus made and works like He performed!

In one of His more unpopular teachings about His divisive mission, Jesus said this to His disciples: “All men will *hate you because of Me.*” He then went on to tell them that if His religious enemies called Him “Beelzebub” – meaning “Satan” or the “Prince of demons,” they should not expect the world to love them! He was letting them know in no uncertain terms that hanging out with Him was going to be very bad for their reputation and social standing in the local synagogue! There would be no easy-believism or “peace and prosperity” in following Him! That’s why He assured them:

“If the world *hates you*, keep in mind that it *hated Me first*. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the

words I spoke to you: “No servant is greater than his master.”
If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also...They will treat you this way because of My name” (Jn. 15:14-21).

Note that Jesus said that their persecution would be “...because of *My name*.” The *Name* of Jesus Christ is both the most loved and most hated name in the entire world! It’s because of all that the Name “Jesus the Christ” represents. It means that He was not just a *great teacher or good moral example* for people to follow. No. His Name means that He is *God Incarnate...the Jewish Messiah...the Son of God...the Savior of the world...the Lord of glory...the coming “King of kings and Lord of lords!* There just cannot be any neutrality about that Name!

It has often been noted that there are only 3 plausible options about that “*Name*” and the Person it represents. Either He was a *liar...lunatic...or Lord*. There are no other reasonable explanations. So His claims in the First Century caused division and they still do so to this very day and hour. Decisively decide for Him – and *divisions will follow you all the days of your life!* Count on it.

Principle:

“There are only 3 plausible options when it comes to the claims of Jesus Christ:

Either He was a *liar...a lunatic...or Lord of all!*”

That’s why Jesus warned His disciples to “count the cost” of following Him. He said to do so would be tantamount to taking up a cross...giving up...totally surrendering...dying to self. Succinctly put, He said to them: “Any of you who does not *give up everything* he has cannot be My disciples” (Lk. 14:28-33).

If that were not clear enough, Jesus further said to them: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring *peace* to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a *sword*” (Matt. 10:34). Doctor Luke’s

account of these disturbing and dividing words of Jesus are as follows:

“I have come to bring *fire* on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!...Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you but *division*. From now on there will be five in one family *divided against each other*, three against two and two against three. They will be *divided*, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law” (Lk. 12:49-53).

Matthew’s account summarizes this sobering teaching about “family divisions” because of Jesus with these words:

“A man’s enemies will be the members of his own household. Anyone who loves his father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me; and *anyone who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me*” (Matt. 10:36-37).

Sobering words indeed! And while many cultic leaders have radically abused this text to manipulate their followers against their parents and siblings, the truth of what Jesus said is still painfully clear. It cannot be avoided. It is one of the inevitable results of following Him. So like it or not – believe it or not, our decision about Him here and now – regardless of the divisions it may cause in our relationships, will determine His decision about us one day before the Father in Heaven. Listen afresh to these words of the Lord Jesus that have incredible spiritual and social weight for both time and eternity:

“Whoever acknowledges Me before men, I will also acknowledge him before My Father in heaven. But whoever disowns Me before men, I will disown him before My Father in heaven” (Matt. 10:32-33).

So in reality, *there is no more divisive person in human history than Jesus Christ!* Follow Him and both *decision* and *division* will also follow you. They are two sides of the same coin. The Apostle Paul expressed this incredible spiritual paradox with these words of praise:

“But *thanks be to God*, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the *fragrance of the knowledge of Him*. For we are to God the *aroma of Christ* among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the *smell of death*; to the other, the *fragrance of life*.”

Then Paul ended this mind-blowing statement with a rhetorical question: “*And who is equal to such a task?*” The answer is blatantly obvious. *No one!* Not Paul...not you...not me. None of us is spiritually qualified in and of ourselves for such a task of eternal consequence. But that’s still our calling as Christ followers. Therefore, we can only humbly echo what Paul said of himself when he concluded this description of following Christ and said that we are “...like men *sent from God*” (II Cor. 2:14-17).

So because we are also “...sent from God,” we must be faithful to our Christ-centered message and calling. No compromises. Then both the *decisions* and *divisions* are His responsibility!

Principle:

“The Name of ‘*Jesus*’ is the most divisive name in the world. To follow Him means that *decision* and *division* will follow you – *life to life and death to death*.”

SATANIC DIVISIONS

But there is a second great source of division in the universe – *Satan*. Since I have already mentioned the “devil as a divider,” let’s

look more at him and his *diabolical divisions*. As you will recall, his very origin as Satan came as a result of the rebellion and division he brought in heaven in some eon of eternity past. Obviously a *rebellion* is nothing more or less than a “division in the ranks” – whether human or angelic. Because of Lucifer’s discontent in being an arch angel, he sowed seeds of spiritual dissent among the angelic host. He wasn’t satisfied in being an arch angel over other myriads of the heavenly host. He wanted to take God’s place of eternal supremacy.

We read about this “heavenly division” created by Lucifer in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28. There he is called the “morning star.” That’s because the name “Lucifer” means the “bright and shining one.” I will not go into great detail on that angelic rebellion at this point because I have done so in another book (*). It is sufficient for this study to just note that *it was discontent about his “station in life” that caused his rebellion*. Rather than *serve God*, he wanted to *be God*. He became puffed up in pride and wanted to take God’s place on the throne of the universe. The very first clinched fist in the universe took place – and it was against God. The annals of heaven recount that inception of sin in the universe and rebellion against God: “In the *pride of your heart* you said, ‘*I am a god*; I sit on the throne of a god’” (Ezek. 28:2). Once *pride* had conceived rebellion in his heart, it soon expressed itself in 5 ego-driven assertions – each beginning with “*I will!*” (Isa. 14:13-14). In my book on Satan I summarize them this way...

- Ambition: “*I will ascend...*”
- Appearance: “*I will raise...*”
- Autonomy: “*I will sit...*”
- Arrogance: “*I will ascend...*”
- Authority: “*I will make...*”

Each of these rebellious assertions begin with “I” – which is the essence of sin. When you spell the word “S-I-N,” the center letter is “I.” So *self* is the *heart of sin*. The continuous cry of the ego is the

doxology of the “trinity of self” – *me...my...mine!* “I” is also the center of P-R-I-D-E. Therefore, the essence of pride, sin and rebellion is *self-assertion...self-will...self-rule...self-sufficiency...self-satisfaction!* It is *self* ruling and reigning on the throne of your heart instead of God.

Principle:

“*Self-will* and *self-rule* are the essence of pride, sin and rebellion.”

Sin then, is *ego* wanting to be on the throne rather than God! It is the rule of the “Big I.” It started in heaven with Lucifer and it continues to this very moment in the heart of every member of Adam’s fallen rebellious race! It is what all of us “do naturally.” That’s why C.S. Lewis rightly observed: “Man is not just a sinner who needs forgiveness, he is a *rebel* who needs to lay down his arms.”

Lucifer quickly found out that heaven can have only *one will* – which is *God’s will*. Lucifer thought there was room for *two wills* – with his being supreme over God’s. It was an eternally fatal mistake! It cost him everything. Pride always causes this in the end. And its downfall is devastating (Prov. 16:18).

John’s revelation looks back to this Lucifer-led rebellion in heaven and gives us this description of the “rise and fall of Satan.” There he is pictured as a great dragon fighting against God.

“His tail swept a *third* of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth...*they lost their place in heaven*. The great dragon was hurled down – that ancient serpent called the *devil* or *Satan*, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth and his angels with him” (Rev. 12:4-9).

Lucifer was no match for God – even with one third of the angelic host supporting him in his rebellion. Even if every angel and arch

angel would have rebelled, they would have lost. All power is derived from the one Omnipotent God.

In heaven then, there is only *one God...one throne...one will...one glory*. That's why Jesus taught His disciples to pray: "*Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven*" (Matt. 6:10).

SELFISH DIVISIONS

But in our world today, there are not just the two competing wills of God and Satan. No. There are over *6 billion wills* – each selfishly wanting his or her own way! It is heard early in the life of every child who learns to speak and cries out: "*Mine!*" And that selfish, possessive cry will echo all the days of his or her life.

Since the first rebellious "I will" came from Satan's heart, he has been the master manipulator of man's selfish will for his own dark and diabolical purposes. And he can cause pride to assert itself *inside the church* just as easily as *outside the church* – often more so! Don't forget that *pride* and *self-will* began in *heaven* – not in *hell!* So while heaven was the *origin* of pride, hell will be its ultimate eternal *destination*. Therefore, because of the heavenly origin of pride, it seems that the church has always had a disproportionate number of people like a man in the Early Church named Diotrephes "...who loves to be *first*" (III Jn. 9). So the "me first" spirit is in the heart of all of us – just like Diotrephes!

Principle:

"Because *pride* originated in heaven rather than in hell, it will always be one of the biggest problems in the church."

As a result of this universal self-centeredness, *the single greatest problem Jesus had with His disciples was dissension, division and disunity*. Apparently they often argued among themselves over who was the most important disciple. On one occasion as they walked to Capernaum Jesus said to them: "What were you *arguing about*

on the road? But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about *who was the greatest.*”

Principle:

“Because the single greatest problem Jesus had with His disciples was *dissension, division and disunity*, theological and denominational splits will always be the biggest problem in the church.”

A close study of the Gospels shows that this vying for power and jockeying for “first position” was not an unusual tension between the disciples but one that seemed to surface over and over again. On this occasion, Jesus stopped the journey dead in their tracks and sat down to talk this out. “If anyone wants to be *first*,” Jesus said, “he must be the very *last*, and the *servant of all*.” He then illustrated His point by taking “...a little child and had him stand among them. With this living parable before them, He said to them:

“I tell you the truth, *unless you change and become like little children*, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever *humbles himself like this child* is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:1-4).

It was a timely lesson on *childlikeness* and *humility* – but did not last long. On another occasion we read about how two of the disciples who were brothers, James and John, even got their mother to intercede with Jesus in their behalf so that one could sit on his right and the other on his left in His kingdom. This really angered the others to the degree that we read: “When the ten heard about this they were *indignant* with the two brothers” (Matt. 20:24). So to keep a total relational melt-down from taking place, Jesus had to again have a “team meeting.” He called them together and had a lesson on authority and servant leadership:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become *great* among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be *first* must be your slave – just as *the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many*” (Matt. 20:25-28).

Unlike the worldly Gentile rulers, Jesus taught and demonstrated authentic *servant leadership* to His disciples when He said: “I am among you as one who *serves*” (Lk. 22:28).

Principle:

“The only spiritual solution for *self-will* and *self-seeking* is *self-surrender* – just as the only cure for *selfish leadership* is *servant leadership*.”

So for the three years of His public ministry, this tension over “who is greatest” erupted from time to time in both words and actions among the disciples. If it happened in the very presence of the Lord Jesus, why should we be surprised when it continues in His church today when He is physically absent and only present through His Spirit?

We see this same *self-seeking spirit* assert itself in the Book of Acts in the church. Early in the life of the new nascent church we read of one of the first accounts through the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira. And as is so often the case in the church, it had to do with *money!* You remember how this couple conspired with each other to try and deceive Peter and the other Believers about their apparent generosity in giving. They wanted to appear as generous as Barnabas who had sold a piece of land and given the money to the church to help the poor and needy among them. But they were only faking it. Their giving was only a *prideful ploy* to call attention to themselves. But it cost them their lives!

Before God “judged them unto death,” Peter said to them: “Ananias, how is it that *Satan has so filled your heart* that you have *lied to the Holy Spirit...You have not lied to men but to God.*” And at those words “...he fell down and died.” Within a brief period of time the same fate happened to his wife who tried to perpetuate the same deception. So this “judgment unto death” by God was to teach the early church that God would not tolerate pride, deceit and division in His church – whether it was over money or position!

If God still judged people in the church this way, we would have pews full of dead saints after the offering was taken! Deception about the giving of our tithes and offerings is still one of the biggest lies in the American church! And giving studies consistently show that the vast majority of Christians in the West are “tippers” and not “tithers” – just like Ananias and Sapphira!

The sad story of this carnal half-stepping couple in the Early Church is a logical stepping stone to the third source of division in the church – *self...people...individuals...Christians – you and me.*

As the greatest church planter in the First Century, Paul had to constantly fight against carnal splits and divisions in the church. That’s why he warned the saints in Rome: “Watch out for those who cause *divisions...keep away from them.* For such people are not serving our Lord Christ” (Rom. 16:17-18). He also gave similar pastoral advice to young Titus who was nurturing the pioneer churches in Crete: “Warn a *divisive person* once and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him” (Tit. 3:10).

Paul then, had a very low tolerance for anyone who had a “divisive spirit.” In both cases quoted above, he said to “...keep away from them...have nothing to do with them.” He clearly knew that such people would constantly *divide the body, decrease her power and diffuse her witness.*

You do not even have to “read between the lines” in the New Testament to see the struggles the early church had with dissention and division. Note several more prominent ones.

“My brothers, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that *there are quarrels among you*. What I mean is this: One of you says, ‘I follow Paul’ another, ‘I follow Apollos’ another, ‘I follow Cephas’ still another ‘I follow Christ.’ *Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?*” (I Cor. 1:11-13)

It is very instructive to note here that the word for “quarrels” is the Greek word, *schismata*. Just as the word looks and sounds, it is where we get the word *schism*. The word has its origin in the garment industry of Paul’s day. It was the word for a soiled, stained, wrinkled or torn piece of cloth – one that no merchant would hand up to sell because it was *schismata* – unattractive, unappealing, undesirable. They would only hang up their best and most attractive pieces of cloth to sell. No one would be drawn to a *schismata* garment! In the same way, Paul tells these early quarrelling Christians in Chloe’s house church that their disunity was adversely influencing their witness. Unless they “got their act together,” their *schismata* would drive people away from the church. No one would want to “buy what they were selling” because of their *schismata*.

Later in his letter to them he repeated this same exhortation about their growing divisive spirit. He warned them that it was a sign of *spiritual immaturity* – not maturity:

“Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly – mere *infants in Christ*...You are still worldly. For since there is *jealousy and quarreling* among you, are you not worldly”? are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not mere men?” (I Cor. 3:1-4).

Sadly, one of the places that their disunity at Corinth was showing up was at the Lord's Table. So Paul had to write a strong rebuke to them. "In the following directives I have no praise for you, for *your meetings do more harm than good*. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, *there are divisions among you*" (I Cor 11:17-18).

What an indictment against the church at Corinth! Paul said that because of their quarreling and divisions that their "...meetings do more harm than good!" In other words, it would be better not to even meet together as Christians than to do so with divisive spirits – especially for the celebration of Communion! The divisions among them were not edifying internally or externally. So Paul said it is better not to meet together than to do so with carnal and competitive spirits! And sadly, the Lord's Table that should be one of our greatest unifying experiences and celebrations – continues to be one of the biggest areas of separation in the Body of Christ. Tragically, the practice of "open Communion" or "closed Communion" will probably continue until the Lord returns!

Just like Jesus often faced internal divisions with His disciples, Paul faced the same with the young leaders he was mentoring. We can see this in something telling he wrote to the saints at Philippi:

"I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to *agree with each other in the Lord*. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the Gospel..." (Phil. 4:2-3).

Isn't it sad that these two women have gone down in the annals of Holy Writ this way? I would imagine that they are "eternally embarrassed" by this epitaph about their contentious spirits as women leaders in the early church! However, their story provokes the question to you and me: "*How will I be remembered as a Christian leader* – whether male or female?" Will I be known for my

“spirit of disagreement?” Or will I be remembered as one who has faithfully and humbly ministered “side by side” with others in partnership for God’s Kingdom and glory?

So there was as much man-centered-divisions in the Early Church as there is today. That’s because human nature has not changed since the Garden of Eden. We all have within us that dominant and driving desire to take “first place.” As I wrote earlier, that’s why the “me first” attitude is evidenced early in the life of every child and continues to manifest itself throughout life. And the only thing that changes that ego-driven nature in all of us is crucifixion...dying out to self...total surrender, as Paul pointed out (Gal. 2:20). Only as we consistently “walk the Calvary Road” will a spirit of *humility* replace haughtiness. And that kind of *dying out to self* and *enthronement of Christ* does not happen easily or quickly. It is a part of the life-long sanctification process through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Principle:

“Total *self-surrender* followed by a *daily dying to self* is the only source of spiritual victory and unity in Christ.”

UNITY IN THE SPIRIT

As we know, the church was born on the Day of Pentecost with an initial group of “...about one hundred and twenty people” (Acts 1:15). Doctor Luke tells us that “...they were all *together* in *one place*.” Then as they prayed, “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:1, 4). It is not very difficult to get a group of Christians to meet “together in one place.” But only the Holy Spirit can produce what was said later of these Christians: “All the believers were *one in heart and mind*...” (Acts 4:32). What a beautiful description of how it should be with us Christians: “*One place...one heart...one mind*.”

Millions of Christians meet every week in churches all over the world. It is not difficult to get them gathered in “one place.” All you

have to do is announce the *date, time* and *location* and you can get Christians in “one place.” But getting them to be of “one heart” and “one mind” is the on-going challenge! Is it any wonder then that Paul exhorted the Christians of his day:

“I appeal to you brother, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you *agree with one another* SO THAT *there may be no divisions among you* and that you may be *perfectly united in mind and thought*” (I Cor. 1:10).

How very timely then is Paul’s exhortation about *humility* – not only to the church at Philippi, but to all of the Body of Christ worldwide:

“If you have any *encouragement from being united with Christ*, if any *comfort from His love*, if any *fellowship with the Spirit*, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being *like-minded*, having the same love, *being one in spirit and purpose*. Do nothing out of *selfish ambition* or *vain conceit*, but *in humility consider others better than yourselves*. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

Paul then illustrates this authentic spirit of humility through the example of Christ – the greatest Servant Leader the world has ever seen:

“Your *attitude* should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but *made Himself nothing*, taking the very nature of a *servant*, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He *humbled Himself* and became obedient to death – even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:1-8).

Paul exhorted the saints at Corinth to so love, honor and respect each other “...that there be *no divisions* in the body” (I Cor. 12:25).

That's why Jesus told His disciples that *love* would be the great distinguishing mark of authentication to the world. That's why He commanded them to willfully demonstrate agape among themselves:

“A new *command* I give you: *Love one another*. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. *By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another*” (Jn. 13:34-35).

Agape love then is not an option. It is a *command* from the Lord Jesus to every one of His followers. And agape is not a *feeling, emotion* or *experience* of the heart. It is nothing short of a *disposition of the will*. We are to *willfully* commit ourselves to loving each just like Christ loves us! It is a divinely inspired and empowered *attitude of humility* that results in on-going *agape actions* toward each other.

Principle:

“*Agape love* among ourselves and *unity in the Spirit* are our greatest proof to the world that we are truly Christ's disciples.”

NATIONAL CHURCH UNITY

In conclusions then, when an indigenous church adopts *foreign names...theologies... titles...dress...styles of buildings...liturgies of worship...technologies...musical instruments*, etc., much of their spiritual unity with other local Christians and churches is lost. The more they identify externally with foreigners, the less they are able to identify with their local people.

Therefore, an *increase of foreign influence* always brings with it a *decrease in individuality* and *autonomy*. As a result, the local church is often seen as “*foreign...alien...western*.” When that happens, Christianity is perceived as the “*white man's religion*” rather than an authentic indigenous expression of faith in the true

and living God. This overt identification with Western Christianity only adds another unnecessary “stumbling block” to the message of the Gospel other than the one of the cross (I Cor. 1:23).

Oftentimes, *unity* with other local believers and churches is lost as *uniformity* with foreign donors is increased. My experience has been that *uniformity with foreign churches, denominations and theologies almost always weakens or destroys local unity*. This is caused by the fact that the national church has to be increasingly sensitive to the desires and dictates of the foreign group – especially if they are sending a lot of funds. Then the predominant issue is pleasing their “foreign donor” and jumping through the hoops they require to get continued support. Sensitivity to their local brothers and sisters in Christ has to take a back seat. After all, local Christians and indigenous ministerial organizations are not the basis for most of the finances. Foreign individuals and agencies are. That’s why we often say: “The church operates by the ‘Golden Rule’ – which means that those who have the gold, *rule!* It is sad but true that money in missions is often used to *manipulate* and control the local indigenous church.

Principle:

“The church is to operate by the ‘Golden Rule,’
not the ‘rule of gold.’”

Sadly then, *one of the greatest things that divide Christians is money!* We saw it in the First Century Church through the attempted financial deceit of Ananias and Sapphira. That’s why there are a number of timely exhortations against “favoritism in the church” based on money – along with a call to the responsible use of wealth and riches (I Tim. 6:17-19; Ja. 2:1-4, 9; 5:1-6, etc). But sadly, *money* and *materialism* continue to be the greatest dividers when it comes to ministry and fellowship on the mission field today.

UNITY FOR EVANGELISM

Is it any wonder then, that Jesus prayed for *unity among His disciples*. It was the theme of His High Priestly Prayer for them the night before He went to the cross. He concluded this prayer by reminding them that their love and unity would be one of their greatest tools for evangelism:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be *one*, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in Us *so that the world may believe that You have sent Me*...May they be brought to *complete unity to let the world know that you sent Me*. I have given them the *glory* that you gave Me. That they may be *one* as We are one. I in them and you in Me. May they be brought to *complete unity* to let the world know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me”...” (John 17:21-23)

Jesus then, prayed for the same unity among His disciples – and us, that He enjoyed as a Member of the eternal Godhead. Just as there is *eternal unity* in the midst of *eternal diversity* between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Jesus prayed for that *unified diversity* among His disciples. He prayed that there would be both an *organic* and *organizational unity* among them that would result in two things: the *glorification of the Father* and the *evangelization of the world*. So *our unity* and *God’s glory* are inseparably connected to global missions. Only as the world sees our *loving unity* will they believe that Jesus was indeed God’s Messiah – which will result in great *glory* to God.

Jesus knew well then, that there would be a direct and inseparable connection between their unity, world evangelism and God’s glory.

Principle:

“The *unity in diversity* among Christians is to be a reflection of the *unity in diversity* in the Trinity –

which will be our greatest tool of evangelism and mission.”

It is for the cause of evangelism that Paul exhorted Christians to work hard at demonstrating and maintaining their *unity in diversity* before a watching world:

“Make every effort to keep *the unity of the Spirit* through the bond of peace. There is *one body and one Spirit...one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, Who is over all and through all and in all*” (Eph. 4:3-4).

Unity then, is a spiritual goal that we are strongly encouraged to believe in...work for...strive for...demonstrate...incarnate to the world. If the Trinity eternally demonstrates this “*unity in diversity*,” we are to constantly work hard at giving clear expression to it for as long as we live on this earth. It is one of the single greatest ways we *glorify God and evangelize the world!*

7-FOLD BASIS OF UNITY

But what is the basis for our “*unity in diversity*” as Christians? Glad you asked because Paul carefully and clearly outlines it. In this passage we find the “7-Fold Basis of Unity” among all Believers of all times under all circumstances. Paul reminds us that there is but one “*body...Spirit...hope...Lord...faith...baptism ...God and Father of all.*” It is around these seven great truths that we must be “united in love” (Col. 2:2). It is around these 7 great revelations that we “...brethren can dwell together in *unity*” (Ps. 133:1). We need nothing more or less than these 7 truths as our basis of “unity in the Spirit.”

So the persistent carnal divisions in the Body of Christ locally and globally are one of the greatest testimonies against our spiritual legitimacy. And our disunity tells the world a lie about the Godhead where there is never disunity. So we all need to work harder at

demonstrating that same *loving unity in diversity* to the watching world.

On one occasion Jesus stated a crucial principle: “*A house divided against itself cannot stand*” (Matt. 12:25). The church cannot stand successfully or victoriously against the world, flesh and the devil as a “divided household.” History has shown that most often we *Christians are our own greatest enemy*. When we turn in on ourselves in conflict, we lose our focus on who our real enemy is. We forget where the real battlefield is. As a result, we spend far too much of our time, energy and resources competing and fighting among ourselves. Our on-going “family feuds” are keeping us from reaching the world and ministering to a hurting humanity. *A divided church has little to say to a divided world. A fighting church has little to show to a fighting world.*

Principle:

*“A divided church has little to preach to a divided world;
A fighting church has little to teach to a fighting world.”*

How timely then is Paul’s exhortation to the saints in Colossae and to all of us:

“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God...Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature... since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self...therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues *put on love*, which binds them all together in *perfect unity*” (Col. 3:2-14).

Therefore, my prayer and benediction for this chapter is the one that Paul prayed for the saints at Rome:

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a *spirit of unity* among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with *one heart* and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:5-6).

Amen!

(*) See my book: *The Rise and Fall of Satan* for a more thorough study of the devil and his demonic attributes.

CONCLUSIONS

As I come to the close of this book, my summary to my national brothers is the same that Paul gave the early church that was being pressured by outside forces to conform to their standard of spirituality: “*Stand firm...and do not be moved*” (Gal. 5:1). Do not be like *Esau* and sell your indigenous spiritual birthright for a “foreign financial stew” (Gen. 25:29-34; 27:36)! Sadly, Esau took the quick route to gratifying the flesh, and lost God’s blessing upon his life. Therefore, do not let “foreign Jacobs” rob you of your rich spiritual birthright and blessing as an indigenous church! Avoid the “*Denomination of Esau!*” It will only make you the “First Church of the Wilderness” – which is not where Christ wants you to live and minister.

I urge you then, to resist the temptation to compromise your *indigenous integrity* by copying the Western Church in the areas of...

- Church Names
- Church Titles

- Church Dress
- Church Buildings
- Church Worship
- Church Giving
- Church Unity

Continue to be led by the Holy Spirit into your full indigenous birthright under the Headship of Jesus Christ. Continue to allow the dynamic of the Spirit to create fresh new wine skins for the unique work God is doing in and through you. And continue to set for us in the Western Church a “new direction” in evangelism and discipleship under His authority. We desperately need you to be all that God has raised you up to be as the new leaders of the global church in the Twenty First Century! We are thankful and humbled by the role in global missions the Lord has allowed us in the Western church to play in the past. We pray the day of our effectiveness for the Great Commission is still not over. But this is your day and hour! *The future of missions belongs to you – not us!* You are already the numerical and spiritual majority in the global Body of Christ! Give us and the watching world the Biblical level of servant leadership... theological balance...moral integrity...marital transparency...and financial accountability we in the Body of Christ so desperately need.

As your brother and partner, I lovingly exhort you to remember who you once *were* – and who you now *are* “in Christ Jesus.”

“You...like living stones are being built into a *spiritual house* to be a *holy priesthood*, offering *spiritual sacrifices* acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...You are a *chosen people*, a *royal priesthood*, a *holy nation*, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the *people of God*...Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the

pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us". (I Peter 2:5, 9-12)

Look to Jesus as your exalted *Spiritual Head!* Through Him God will "...bless you with *every spiritual blessing* in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus." (Eph. 1:3).

Remember what Paul further said about the church:

- "...You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but *fellow citizens* with God's people and members of *God's household*, built on the foundation of the Apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a *holy temple* in the Lord. And in Him *you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.*" (Eph. 3:19-22)
- "His intent was that now *through the church*, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to His eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In Him and through faith in Him we may approach God with freedom and confidence...For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom His whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to Him who is able to do *immeasurably more than all we ask or think*, according to His power that is at work within us, to

Him be *glory in the church* and *in Christ Jesus* throughout all generations for ever and ever! Amen” (Eph. 3:10-21).

“TO HIM BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH!”