

Miscellaneous Studies

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The Armor of Light

This is the message. "This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is **light**, and in Him is no darkness at all" (I John 1:5). God is light. As Jesus has ascended to the glory of the spiritual throne of David, "He alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see" (I Timothy 6:16). Jesus, on the throne, risen and ascended, is the radiance of the Father's glory, and therein the exact representation of His nature. "And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it" (John 1:5).

The Christian needs to see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ; his spiritual eyes need to be enlightened by understanding the three phases of Christ:

1. Christ in the flesh
2. The bodily resurrection
3. Christ in glory

As the Christian in increasing clarity sees the spiritual image of the blazing light that is Christ, he can increasingly become a partaker of that divine nature. After all, when he was immersed into Christ, he was clothed with Christ, who is light. "Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts" (Romans 13:12-14).

Have you ever thought of light as armor? It is exciting to think that as we continuously put on Christ, we have divinely powerful armor, which will cause Satan's missiles to bounce off without harm! There is a shining shield all about the Christian.

But we must put the armor on and keep it on. The deeds of darkness must be laid aside. Note the breakdown:

1. Carousing and drunkenness
2. Sexual promiscuity and sensuality
3. Strife and jealousy

Do you realize that one who causes strife and is jealous is just as immoral a person as a drunkard or adulterer and is on the road to Hell? These must be laid aside.

When we prepare to go on a long journey, we make certain provisions. For those things, which are important, we ensure supply points and stopping places. For those things, which are unimportant, we make no provision.

There are two roads. One leads to destruction, for which the flesh is amply provided - in fact, its provision for the flesh is its main attraction. The other road, a narrow way, makes no provision for the flesh. Choose this day to walk this way, and make whatever effort is necessary to put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Predetermined Plan Of God

To the surprise of many, there is a God in heaven. And to the surprise of many more, He has a definite plan. The apostle Peter, on the day of Pentecost, 30 A.D. (the birthday of the church), informed his Jewish compatriots concerning Jesus, that He was “delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23).

God has what he calls a predetermined plan. And the elements of that plan center first around Jesus. It was God’s intention from the beginning that He should be pierced through for the transgressions of all the sheep, which have gone astray. It pleased to accept the blood of thousands of lambs until such time as the Lamb of God would be offered as a perfect sacrifice. Before ages began, it was the kind intention of His will that Jesus by resurrected from the dead – that the temple of His body be raised on the third day.

Not only this, it is God’s purpose that in the fulness of times that everything – in heaven and on earth - be summed up in Christ. In order for this summation to take place, it is obvious that some addition should be under way. Hence we find that from the beginning of the church, the Lord adds to the number every day those who are being saved (Acts 2:47)

Within the framework of God’s predetermined plan, each individual makes his own choices. God stretches out His hand in an urgent, heart-felt appeal to those who walk in their own way. He is “patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9)

We invite you to become a willing participant in God’s plan. Follow these steps:

1. Believe that God raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 10:9,10)
2. Repent from dead works (Hebrews 6:1)
3. Confess that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 8:37)
4. Be immersed for the forgiveness of your sins and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38)
5. Grow, grow, grow (I Peter 2:1-3)

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The Church as a Bride

Marriage has always been a time of excitement and joy. Jesus, for example, used the illustration of marriage to show why His disciples didn't fast like the Pharisees and disciples of John. "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?" asked He.

In addition to joy and excitement, the picture of a bride is one of the lady patiently and faithfully waiting for her groom. In the parable of the foolish and wise virgins of Matthew 25:1-13, the wise virgins were prepared to be faithful for as long as it took for the groom to arrive. The foolish were not ready for the long haul.

But the major thrust of the New Testament teaching concerning the church as a bride is that of purity. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul pictures the church as a bride being cleansed of every spot and wrinkle (Ephesians 5:25-27) so that the church should be holy and blameless. In the scene of the marriage supper of the lamb, The bride is presented as pure and white (Revelation 19:7-10).

The ideas of purity and anxiously awaiting the bridegroom tie together. In I John 3, Christians are described as having the hope of being transformed into the likeness of the resurrected Christ at His return. The aged apostle appends these words: "And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, Just as He is pure" (I John 3:3). The test of whether we really hope in Christ's return is in being willing to purify ourselves.

The purity of the Scripture pervades every aspect of our lives.

Purity of thought,
Purity in deed;
Purity of speech,
Purity in screed.

Remember this: the wisdom from above is first pure (James 3:17)! Get ready.

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From Their Sins

He has been given the name, which is above every name. It is at the name of JESUS that every knee should bow. And the name of JESUS that every tongue shall confess. It is that name which is on the lips of those who faithfully partake of His Supper in remembrance. It is that name which is the subject of the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, which are offered as a continual sacrifice of praise by the priests of the New Covenant. It is by that name by which the unworthy may boldly approach the great throne of grace. What a name!

But we must not allow the greatness, which is attributed to the name by virtue of His resurrection to rush us past the circumstances of its giving in the first place. We recall that as Joseph contemplated putting Mary away in seclusion because of her pregnancy out of wedlock. An angel appeared to him. After revealing the conception by the Holy Spirit, the angel informed Joseph: "She will bear a son; and you shall call His name JESUS. For it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

His name was called JESUS because He came to save us from our sins. JESUS – God our Savior – from our sins!

His blood was poured out - for our sins!

His body was offered – for our sanctification!

His blood was sprinkled – for our clean consciences!

"For you first," the apostle Peter explained to early Jews, "God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways" (Acts 3:26). Please turn – before you burn.

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The Church as a Body

“There is,” the apostle Paul avows, “one body” (Ephesians 4:4). The one body of Christ is very important the plan of God. And that body is the church (Ephesians 1:22,23)

In that Christ is the head of the body, and the body the fulness of Christ. People enter into the body of Christ at precisely the same instant at which they enter into Christ – in immersion in water. “For in one spirit we were all immersed into one body” (I Corinthians 12:13).

But why is the church referred to as a body? There are some characteristics of a physical body that Christ obviously intended for us to draw upon to understand our inter-relationship as parts of His body.

- **As the head – the brain – directs and coordinates the activities of the physical body, Christ is the head of the church.** – A Christian who is not willing to follow the directions of Christ as revealed in the New Testament disassociates himself from the Head (Colossians 2:18,19). On the other hand, the Christian who follows the instructions of Christ enjoys the fellowship and continuing sustenance of Christ and the body (I John 1:7)
- **The parts of the body are to function as a unit** – The Bible speaks in terms such as “the proper working of each individual part.” Each part is necessary, and each part is to supply something (Ephesians 4:16). And each part is to work together for the growth of the body.

Every Christian is extremely important. His input is necessary to the continuing growth of the body. All he needs to do is approach Christ and the leadership of the local church, and say, “I’ll do whatever needs to be done to move the church of Christ forward.” He will have plenty of work, and he will be necessary to the functioning of the local body!

The Rest of the Story

I have seen, in my travels, bedraggled Christian housewives, harried by the demands of small children, weighted by the problems of living, anxious about their men and their lack of money. I have seen, in my travels, frustrated Christian men, occasionally at odds with one another, fighting with a business that is losing money, concerned about the future of the country, anxious about their wives and their lack of money.

Lest anyone think I speak too hastily, let me add that I have seen, in my travels, far greater problems outside Christianity than inside it.

But the fact remains that there is a restlessness, which occurs in many Christians that shouldn't be there. Jesus said. "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and My load is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

So what is the solution? The key words are "learn from me." If we can learn from Jesus, then we can find rest for our souls. If we fail to learn, then we can expect continual restlessness and anxiety.

- **A clean conscience** – The blood of Jesus can cleanse our conscience from dead works to serve the living God (Hebrews 9:14). The blood of Jesus is contacted in immersion in water; hence "immersion now saves you – not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a clean conscience – through the resurrection of Christ." (I Peter 3:21).
- **Walking in the light** – "If we walk in the light as He himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin" (I John 1:7).
- **Confidence in God** – "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the might hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you.

Begin where Jesus began – in the waters of immersion. Follow His teachings in the New Testament, devote yourselves to the study and practice of His word, and rest here and in eternity will be yours!

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In One Accord

In any local assembly, there are some who are stronger than others in the faith that is in Christ. The stronger, for example, knows that all foods are clean, and every day is holy. Not all in Rome had been able to develop that conviction of faith: and if the situation were not handled properly, some major problems could have arisen. Paul brings these points forward:

- We who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, and not just please ourselves.
- Let each please his neighbor for his good - for his edification.
- Christ, our example, did not please Himself, as it was written in the old Testament, "The reproaches of those who reproached You [the Father] fell upon Me [the Son]" (Psalm 69:9).
- Even these things out of the Old Testament were written for our instruction, so that as we work together in the body of Christ, we might have perseverance, encouragement, and joy.

The Christian needs to pause here, and consider. All the things that were written "in earlier times" were written for our benefit, that we might be encouraged and have hope. That should inspire in us a strong positive desire to read and study the whole Bible. Furthermore, God's commitment to the development of perseverance and encouragement within us is for the purpose of (among other things) strengthening the weaker brethren, just as Christ strengthens us.

"Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:5,6). Christians sometimes tend to view themselves as independent, but God our Father wants us to develop by His grace and instruction the ability to be good "team players."

- "Of the same mind" – To be able to understand. Anticipate. And participate in the "moves" of a fellow worker in the gospel is one of the highest joys of fellowship in God.
- "With one accord" – To participate in mutual agreement and to achieve common goals – this is beneficial to us and pleasing to God.
- "With one voice" – glorify God – One solitary voice singing in the wilderness is not God's goal. The purpose of our righteous Father is that we, the many, might be able in the church to develop one voice and thus glorify God.

What are you willing to suffer to help others join in that one voice and develop one accord?

To The Praise find Glory Of God

God's goal is for the brilliance of His glory to explode in the consciousness of man. Jesus' prayer for unity among His followers was centered in the idea that God was glorified through Jesus Christ, and that all disciples of all generations could be perfected in unity and behold His glory (John 17:1-25). It is not surprising, then, to see this same theme reinforced in the teaching of the apostles. Paul did not want the Christians in Rome bogged down in disputes over holy days and what could be eaten. He wanted them to "with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:6).

Building upon that foundation, the Holy Spirit appeals to us to set aside our judgmental nature. "Wherefore accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God" (Romans 15:7). Christ's willingness to accept us in our weakness is glory to God! Our willingness to accept one another in our weakness is to the glory of God! Thus the Jewish Christians were to accept the Gentile Christians:

1. Christ established a powerful precedent by becoming "a servant to the circumcision [Jews] on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers" (Romans 15:8).
2. Through Christ becoming a servant to the circumcision and confirming - through His crucifixion, resurrection, and sending the Holy Spirit the promises made in the Old Testament, the way was then open "for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy [in accepting them]" (Romans 15:9).
3. The Old Testament scriptures really looked to God being glorified in praise through the Gentiles because of their being accepted –
 - "Therefore I [Christ] will give praise to You [the Father] among the Gentiles, and I will sing to Your name" (Romans 15:9; II Samuel 22:50; Psalm 18:49).
 - "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people" (Romans 15:10; Deuteronomy 32:43).
 - "Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and let all peoples praise Him" (Romans 15:11; Psalm 117:1).
 - "There shall come the Root of Jesse [King David's father], and He who rises to rule over the Gentiles in Him shall the Gentiles hope" (Romans 15:12; Isaiah 11:10)

We have already charged, the apostles would say, that both Jew and Gentiles are under sin. But God in His great mercy saw fit to accept both circumcision and uncircumcision through the service and sacrifice of Christ, that with new joy and hope, they could in one voice, glorify God. "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13). Amen

A Priest of the Gospel

One of the major problems in the community of saints in Rome was the acceptance of Gentile Christians by those of Jewish background, and vice-versa. Hence the emphasis on the need of both to be redeemed through the blood of Christ, and the need for mutual tolerance of different customs in the assembly. Weakness of brethren is to be borne by the strong in imitation of Christ and by the strong in imitation of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Positively, the apostle then says, "And concerning you, my brethren, I myself am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another" (Romans 15:14). He was convinced the church in Rome could accomplish what it needed to.

"But," says he, "I have written very boldly to you on some points, so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, that my offering of the Gentiles might become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:15,16). Some thoughts:

- Even though the church in Rome could handle most problems, this acceptance of the Gentiles needed bold writing from Paul.
- Just as the Old Testament priest offered sacrifice in service to God, Paul was a New Testament priest, dispensing forgiveness of sins through the gospel offering up the Gentiles as a fragrant aroma to God.
- The Gentiles could only be an acceptable sacrifice if they were offered without blemish; thus the need for them to be made "without spot" through the cleansing offered in the ministration of the gospel.
- The actual sanctifying work was done by the Holy Spirit.

"Therefore in Christ [not in law]," the apostle humbly says "I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me..."

- Resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles in word and deed
- In the power of signs and wonders in the power of the Spirit

"...so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ" (Romans 15:17-19). Preach on, Paul, preach on! And may many more "priests ministering the gospel of God" arise, and may the offering of the Gentiles as an acceptable sacrifice greatly increase.

I Aspired to Preach the Gospel

There is a tendency of modern church-builders to run over to some denominational seminar to learn "how to do it" Denominational methods are designed to build denominational churches preaching a perverted gospel. But the emphasis of the New Testament is not on methods; it is in developing the character and intensity of the men who carry the treasure in their earthen vessels.

Consider the apostle Paul. Here was one man whose single-eyed focus on preaching the word accomplished immeasurably more than thousands of bleary-eyed double-visioned "church planters." When your goal is to plant churches, you tend to compromise the zeal for simply scattering the seed of the living and abiding word of Cod. Consider Paul:

- Immediately following his immersion. He proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue in Damascus. His intensity continued despite persecution and soon had to be let over the city wall in a basket to avoid being killed!
- After being sent out from Antioch of Syria on his first missionary journey, he split synagogue after synagogue, facing scorn, ridicule, persecution and death by stoning.

Later preaching resulted in his being beaten, whipped and jailed. But all through the suffering and hardship, this man of God continued preaching with fervor and intensity at every opportunity.

The character and zeal of Paul is what needs to be studied and imitated by those who would be present-day soldiers of the Cross. And all Christians need to better understand what a fight the good fight of faith is, so they can understand the intensity of one who would call a governor's advisor a son of the devil, and a high priest of Israel a whitewashed wall. "Be imitators of me," said he, "as I also am of Christ." (I Corinthians 11:1).

Knowing this about Paul helps us to understand the drive behind his comments to the Romans: "And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, that I might not build upon another man's foundation, but as it is written, 'They who had no news of Him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand' " (Romans 15:20,21).

Are there any out there with the aspirations of Paul? Are there any out there who will let someone with Paul's aspirations speak to the world?

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It isn't relevant

Apparently the "Age of Reason" has been transcended by the "Age of Relevant." In order for something to be worth time, we say that it has to be "relevant" to our needs. It is important we say, that we be able to "relate" to what is going on.

The result of all this relevancy is that newspapers. In order to be relevant, are pitched at (say) a sixth grade level in order to be relevant to adults. Television programs are pitched lower than that (some television programs are pretty low), for the sake of relevancy of course.

Lest any misunderstand, I am very concerned that everything be relevant. The problem is that the implication of modern "relevancy" is that the Bible, the church and preaching are no longer relevant, relics from a past age as it were. For example, some years ago I was talking with a woman who was developing a series of Bible school lessons for a large publishing company for high school age students. Her instructions were not to be "preachy." Has the preaching of the word of the cross become irrelevant? Has it somehow become foolishness to modern Greeks?

Every word of the Bible is relevant to your personal need. Every assembly of the saints is relevant to your personal need. Every message expounding the oracles of the living God is relevant to your personal need. You may not at this present time understand how it is relevant but it is. And you may have to change your attitude toward it to make it that way. And some "relates" to your present need more than others.

God's "divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence" (II Peter 1:3). How much more "relevant" do you want it?

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The Church as an Assembly

From the beginning, it has been the habit of some to forsake the assembly (Hebrews 10:25). Every Christian tends to give at least lip service to the credo that God knows our needs far better than we. It is evident from the teaching of the New Testament that one of the great needs is to be in the assembly.

In fact the word translated by many English versions as church is the Greek work *ekklēsia*, which means “those called out, an assembly, or congregation.” Local groups of Christians are denoted as “churches” throughout the pages of the inspired record and this great company of Christians as a whole is designated by the word “church.” God obviously attaches great significance to the idea of the assembly.

By why should Christians assemble? The answer comes in two basic categories:

- **Christians assemble to participate in the Lord’s Supper.** A careful examination of I Corinthians 11:17-34 shows that the reason for the assemblage of the saints is to participate in the loaf and cup, representing the body and blood of Christ. “This do,” Jesus said, “in remembrance of me.” It is exciting to note that this deepest of fellowships is also the proclamation of the Lord’s crucifixion to the world!
- **Christians assemble to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, and to encourage one another (Hebrews 10:23-25).** It is apparent that love and good deeds are not automatic; saints are to stimulate one another. In fact, the brethren are to spend time considering how to stimulate one another. We very deeply need that stimulation and encouragement.

Three important relationships are involved when the saints assemble:

1. Saints toward God in the Lord’s Supper
2. Saints toward the world in the proclamation of the Lord’s death
3. Saints toward one another in the stimulation to love and good deeds

Working through Opinions

"Now accept the one who is weak in faith" (Romans 14:1). In Christ we deal with real people, who have come from variegated backgrounds, and who are in different stages of growth. The one who is weak in faith needs acceptance. That is not to say that his understanding of issues is right, or of equal value with the one who, having been on solid meat for years, is able to discern between good and evil. But the weak in faith needs acceptance, "not for passing judgment on his opinions."

Paul uses two examples to communicate a principle:

- **Vegetarianism** - "One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. Let not him who eats [all things] regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him" (Romans 14:2,3). "...and he who eats does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to the Lord; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God (Romans 14:6).
- **Holy days** - "One man regards one day above another, another man regards every day alike. Let every man be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord..." (Romans 14:5,6).

The general teaching of the New Testament is that all foods are clean, and that all days are holy. However, understanding is something which dawns slowly in the mind; hence the need for evangelists to practice great patience in their instruction. Because there are so many primary principles connected with the communication of the gospel of the risen Christ, instruction on and understanding of foods and holy days has to "be placed on a back burner."

In the body of Christ, to work together, we accept certain things in another Christian without comment to move on to more important concerns: "Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (Romans 14:4). "For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end, Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord of both the dead and of the living" (Romans 14:7-9). Certain things are life and death matters;" others are not. Since we live together in Christ, we are asked to have tolerance for those things which are not at this point of highest priority; That is not to say that the scripture does not have teaching on these matters, because it does; but tolerance is still required! Anyone who has really been successfully involved in seeking and saving the lost will understand why certain basic truths are communicated "as of first importance.

"But you, why do you judge your brother? Or again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:10-12).

Be sure you have the logs out of your eye before you worry too much about the dust in your brother's. Work harder on improving yourself than on improving everyone else.

Do Not Tear Down the Work Of God

It is possible for a Christian to become a victim of "tangentialitis;" to wander off the great truths of Christ into tangents of non-edification. There are some old proverbs (non-Biblical) which express this human tendency: "Making mountains out of mole-hills," and "Majoring in minors" come to mind. There were problems of this nature which were dealt with in the pages of the New Testament, problems of Jewish myths and genealogies, problems over what foods could be eaten, and the observance of feasts and holy days. And there was compounding factor of Christians "looking down their noses" at their brothers who had a different view over one of these.

"Therefore," says the experienced apostle Paul, "let us not judge one another anymore, but rather this - not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way" (Romans 14:13). The important thing is for a brother to enter into the eternal kingdom. If a discussion about vegetarianism is going to detract from that goal at this point, skip it. "I know and I'm convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything is unclean, to him it is unclean. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died" (Romans 14:14,15).

So much depends on the inner attitudes and intent of the Christian. It isn't foods or days that are unclean or holy; it is the Christian's open or hidden purposes, which make the difference. "To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. They profess to know God but by their deeds they deny Him being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed" (Titus 1:15,16) Paul then has a string of inspired thoughts on our relationship with one another in these matters:

- Do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil, for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking.
- The kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit
- He who serves God in the way of righteousness, peace and joy is acceptable to God and approved by men.
- Let us pursue, then, the things, which make for peace and the building up of one another.
- Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food.
- All things are clean; but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense.
- It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.

Let's become increasingly "brother conscious." The question is not so much, "Can I do this and get away with it?" as it is, "Will this cause my brother to stumble and not enter the eternal kingdom?" Are you willing to make that kind of living and holy sacrifice?

Whatever Is Not From Faith Is Sin

It is not good to be a stumbling block. Jesus said that if you or I cause one of the little ones who believe in Him to stumble, it would be better if a heavy millstone were hung around our necks, and we be drowned in the deepest sea. No, it's not good to be a stumbling block.

So Paul said, "Rather determine this - not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way" (Romans 14:13). Our attitudes, then, are to be pure; and instead of looking for ways in which we can disagree, "let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another" (Romans 14:19). "All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything by which your brother stumbles" (Romans 14:20,21).

In Christ there is no "group-think." In Christ we does not exist in terms of *we* believe this or *we* practice that. In Christ it would not be said, "We believe all foods clean." Jesus declared all foods clean, but not everyone believed it. The individual is always responsible for his own thinking and his own belief. "The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God" (Romans 14:22). In Christ, there is no blind following; everyone needs to have his own conviction *before God*.

With regard to the foods a Christian eats, "Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin" (Romans 14:22,23). Several key points stand out:

- Every man must have his own conviction before God (they must be honest convictions and not rationalizations)
- This honest is established when the man does not condemn himself in what he eats, and is happy about it.
- One who doubts is not operating from faith
- One who does what he doubts is right is condemned
- That which does not spring as positive action flowing from faith is sin

Do your actions result from your faith? Are the things you do all done to promote the faith? Or do you condemn yourself in some of the things you approve? Remember, whatever is not from faith is sin.

All Israel Will Be Saved

"My heart's desire and my prayer to God," said Paul in regard to physical Israel, "is for their salvation" (Romans 10:1). If a person is in the saved state at his death, or at Jesus' return, he will go into eternal life; if a person is not saved, he will go into eternal punishment. It does not take much "figurin" to realize that the most important question in a person's life is whether or not he is saved. Paul was so conscious of that point that he gave his life to save the Jew first, and then the Gentile.

But to the Gentile Christians he writes, trying to keep them from becoming arrogant over the fact that the Jews were to some degree set aside so that the Gentiles could come in: "I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in" (Romans 11:25). From the beginning of the church on Pentecost, 30 AD, until the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, 70 AD, God had a percentage of Israel who persecuted the church but who would at some point become Christians. Paul told the Gentile Christians in Rome that he did not want them to be uninformed about this secret of God's. Once all those who had been invited to the wedding feast refused to come, then God burned Jerusalem with fire, and sent His armies to destroy them. And with the fulness of the Gentiles come in, His messengers were to go into the streets and invite all to come to the wedding feast.

But this had not happened yet as Paul wrote to Rome. There were still some Jewish persecutors of the church who would turn to Jesus. "Thus all Israel will be saved, just as it is written, 'The deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob. And this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins' (Romans 11:26, 27). All Israel would be saved. As Paul had said earlier in this letter, "They are not all Israel who are descended from Israel" (Romans 9:6). All Israel is defined as those Jews who would follow Christ.

"From the standpoint of the gospel," he says to the Roman Christians, "they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:28,29). Paul himself was a good example. Hardened for a period of time against the gospel, he was a violent persecutor of Christians, and an enemy of the church. Yet he was chosen from his mother's womb to be an apostle; and when God decided that he had advanced far enough in the ranks of the Pharisees and leadership of Israel, He removed the hardening. God's gift and God's calling was irrevocable; Paul was always willing, but God used him in the affairs of men to maximize the impact of the gospel!

We need to praise God, and make certain about His calling and choosing us! Test yourself. Examine yourself. See if you are saved according to the gospel of God's word!

To God Be the Glory Forever!

God has His ways. He partially hardened Paul and other Jews until He was ready for them to obey the gospel. In strategic places at the times of their conversions, they maximized the impact of the gospel by their turning to Christ when they did. Hence, as Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, he asked that they accept with joy each Jew who, by turning to Christ, demonstrated that he was one of God's chosen, one of God's remnant.

"For just as you who once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience," he reminds these Gentile Christians, so these also now have been disobedient, in order that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. *For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all*" (Romans 11:30-32).

This is the great point of the whole discussion. God is God. He is who He is! He has a plan for man that He has worked from the foundation of the world. From the time He established the ancient nation, He has demonstrated His sovereignty and He has brought all men to recognition of their disobedience, that they might recognize their need for mercy from Him the Almighty!

- Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
- How unsearchable are His judgements and unfathomable His ways!
- For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?
- Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him?
- For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.
- To Him be the glory forever Amen.

In the wisdom of God all men need the mercy expressed through Jesus Christ. This discussion really began in the first chapter of Romans when the apostle expressed that he was not ashamed of the gospel, "for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16). In the chapters which followed, he adequately demonstrated that God did not change His mind, but that He has operated through the history of this world according to a pre-set plan. The Jew has been brought under disobedience; the Gentile has been brought under disobedience; they both need to recognize God's sovereignty and willingly subject themselves to His revealed will.

Have you believed the gospel of God expressed through Jesus Christ? Are you one who has tried to bring Christ up from the dead, or are you willing to change your thinking so it matches the word of faith, which is near you? Are you willing to confess that Jesus is Lord, or are you going to be your own sovereign? Are you going to be immersed into Christ, and crucify the old man of sin, or are you in your stubborn unrepentant heart storing up wrath for yourself for the day of wrath? Can you add your "Amen" to this, "To *Him* be the glory forever"?

Miscellaneous Studies

Your Spiritual Service

I have studied the New Testament in vain in search of the words "worship service." They simply are not there. They are words in the same category as "rapture" and "accept Christ into your heart" - made up terms to justify an unscriptural doctrine. Yet in church building after church building, in announcement after announcement from those who claim to be people of the book, the expression "worship services" has become standard conversational fare. This language of Ashdod has become a dangerous intrusion in confusing the thinking of the saints in the most important subject of all - worship of God.

"Worship" as the activity of a Christian is used in only one passage of the Bible. In the fourth chapter of John's account, a Samaritan woman queried Jesus about Jewish worship at the Temple in Jerusalem vs. Samaritan worship at the false temple on Mt. Gerizem. Jesus informed her that "an hour is coming and now is" [a reference to the on-rushing new covenant] when the worshipers of God would no longer worship at set times and in set places, but they would instead worship "in Spirit and truth" (John 4:20-24). Christians worship at all times in all places. In everything they do they appear, not empty handed, before God in His spiritual temple, celebrating the eternal Passover, and continually offering the first-fruits of the gospel to Him.

Likewise, there was an Old Testament "service." This service was the offering of sacrifices on the alters of the Old Testament tabernacle and temp by God's duly ordained priests, the descendants of Aaron. These physical offerings by these physical priests were replaced in the glorious new covenant by spiritual sacrifices offered by spiritual priests, Christians (I Peter 2:4-10). [As a side note: Which do you think is going to be a more acceptable offering - an unspiritual offering by an unspiritual priest, or a spiritual offering by an spiritual priest?]

Hence it is written I urge you therefore, brethren by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God which is your spiritual service [to which translators add "of worship"] (Romans 12:1) This is the service of a Christian, the continual offering of his body as a sacrifice to the glory of God.

Do you believe in Bible names for Bible things? Get those signs ripped down which talk about "worship services." The saints assemble to break bread. Worship in Spirit and in truth, not at "11:00 am." and "6:00p.m." Offer your body as a sacrifice at all times to Him who sees all things-that's your spiritual service.

Be Transformed By Renewing Your Mind

"Therefore!" A very significant word, this "therefore." It means: Because of what we have just discussed, you now need to act in this specified way. Don't forget "therefore."

Paul, speaking of God, in a great summarizing statement, says, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:36). To which he then adds, "I urge you *therefore*, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service [of worship]" (Romans 12:1). Because God is who He is; *therefore*, our bodies need to be offered as sacrifices.

When you appear before the King, what offering shall you bring to please Him? Shall 666 talents of gold bring a smile? Would peacocks, apes from a far country, or cinnamon from distant coastlands widen His eyebrows? "With what shall I come to the Lord, and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams, in ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my first-born for my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, Oman, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with the Lord your God?" (Micah 6:6-8).

Yes, He has told us what He requires of us-both in the old and new covenants. The glory of God requires the total offering of ourselves.

But how shall we do this? "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). Every person has a choice: To be conformed to this world, or to please God by offering His body as a holy sacrifice. This world is so powerful that only a consistent, systematic reprogramming of the mind will enable us to calmly execute God's will in the midst of a hostile environment.

The good, the acceptable, and the perfect! Renew, reprogram, and perform!

Think So As To Have Sound Judgement

There arises at periodic intervals in a man's life, times when he needs to stop and consider his spiritual position. This world is a rugged, hostile environment, and the conforming powers of this present evil age are both powerfully direct and eerily subtle, "Am I truly being transformed by renewing my mind, or is this world's mold squeezing me into its shape?"

"For through the *grace* given to me," says our helpful instructor, Paul, "I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think: but to think so as to have sound judgment" (Romans 12:3). It requires humble self-reflection for a man to use sound judgment in the sight of God, and recognize where he is, and where he is not. When we begin to honestly examine ourselves, there are barriers to "seeing ourselves as others see us," as one of our own Scottish poets has said.

- What we are and what we can do are usually the result of a log of past practice; and sometimes we want a radical change for ourselves in the body of Christ. But we need to understand that God's grace was at work in us before we became Christians and that His grace has been at work in us in Christ, so that – bored or not – we have now been prepared to perform some function in the body of Christ. Think so as to have sound judgement.
- Sometimes we are not yet what we wish we were. Desire is the start but wishing does not make it so. If you are struggling with compulsive gambling, don't be upset if no one wants you in charge of the church treasury. If you think you are a great orator, but everyone groans when you get up to speak, be aware, and work very hard to improve before you ask to do all of the evening preaching. Think so as to have sound judgement.
- We may need to take our experience of life and re-evaluate what is significant and what is not in the light of God's word. A small congregation, under the leadership of a banking executive, organized itself with board of directors. The man had much executive ability but he needed to look deeper into the word of God and direct his ability in channels consistent with the wisdom of God. Think so as to have sound judgement.
- Women often have special struggles in conjunction with the word of God. Occasionally they can be frustrated with the apparent lack of action on the part of their men, or their unwillingness to speak up. But each woman needs to realize that she has been specially created by God to give glory to men, just as men give glory to God (I Corinthians 11:7). Each woman needs to recognize her special functions in Christ's body in accordance with God's word, and focus on fulfilling her special role. Think so as to have sound judgement.

By God's grace each of us was born physically to our parents formed specially in the womb. We were chosen to live in our time, in our place through His grace and by His grace we have come to hear and appreciate His gospel and His kingdom Let us examine ourselves, and think so as to have sound judgement.

Miscellaneous Studies

Gifts of Grace

Praise God! The church consists of people, people who are different, people who have to work together for the great common commission, People who have been brought together by the will of God to be welded together into one tight offensive unit. "For through the grace given to me," says the experienced apostle Paul, "I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment" (Romans 12:3).

It is critical for the functioning of the local community of Christ that a man use sound judgment to recognize where he is, and where he is not. His faith is such that he can perform some needed duty, and he is not functioning, he really needs to jump in and get to work. On the other hand, if he simply is not able to operate - to hold the attention of his audience, for example - then he needs to recognize that also. "For just as we have many members in our body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Romans 12:4,5). There is a need, by God's gracious choice, for us to have different functions in the body. Some tasks we will grow into; others we will leave behind fellow Christians to fulfill. But, properly understood it is all by God's grace, or favor.

"Now, having different gifts, according to the favor imparted to us –

- **"If prophecy, let us speak accordingly to the analogy of belief."** One of God's continuing gifts of Grace is "forth-telling" – preaching – the word of God. The "analogy of belief" simply means that the forth-teller is to compare his faith with the word of God, and speak no more than what he really understands.
- **"If service, let him perform that service."** If there is some way you can serve, let the leadership of the congregation know, so that they can put you to work. It may not be exactly what you had in mind, but be willing.
- **"If a teacher, let him attend to teaching."** Some people are excellent teachers, but not necessarily preachers. If someone wants to teach or wants to learn how to teach, get with it. But be always ready to listen to feedback so you can improve.
- **"Let him who exhorts continue in his exhortations."** Some people are very good at encouraging others or providing a motivation punch at key times. If you are one of those, continue in your exhortations.
- **"The one who gives, let him do it with liberality."** Some people by God's grace, are givers. Do so, if you are one, without getting bitter toward those how aren't, won't, or aren't yet.
- **"Let him who rules, do it with diligence."** Some people are rulers [you don't like that word?] of congregations. They need to be diligent in this leading, teaching, preaching and they must stay close to the word of God.
- **"Let him who shows pity [mercy], do it with cheerfulness."** A significant percentage of those who have come to be known by Christ are going to be those who have nowhere else to turn. And they are going to need someone to keep encouraging them through their messes. If you are that someone, keep on being cheerful.

Try to analyze, in God's sight where you are. Get help from your brothers and sisters in Christ to keep a balanced perspective. Talk to the leadership of your congregation for more feedback. Get some assignments from them and with cheer and joy in your heart, start functioning.

Miscellaneous Studies

Practical Dos & Don'ts

As Christians, we need to be shining lights in the midst of a crooked arid perverse generation. In the name of Christ we need to glorify God. There are times, however, when the Holy Spirit gives us more specific details as to what to do, and what not to do. The inspired Paul, writing to the Christians in Rome more than 19 centuries ago, gives us a current 'To Do' list.

- **"Let love be without hypocrisy."** Our love needs to be genuine and sincere, without false smiley-faces.
- **"Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good."** There is, and has been, good arid evil. God knows that we truly know the difference between good and evil on the inside for most things. The Christian needs to take a stand.
- **"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love."** It takes a lot of sacrifice to be able to devote yourself to one other person. Yet Cod wants us to be devoted to everyone in the congregation.
- **"Give preference to one another in honor."** Give the other man a chance to grow.
- **"Fervent in spirit."** Hot. Intense.
- **"Serving the Lord."** Not self serving.
- **"Rejoicing in hope."** Only if you have hope can you keep on rejoicing.
- **"Persevering in tribulation."** Eternity is worth any amount of suffering here.
- **"Devoted to prayer."** Jesus could not function in this world without constant communication with the Father. Much less we.
- **"Contributing to the needs of the saints."** This does not mean, 'Let me get in line as a needy saint.' It means digging deep and helping the truly hurting.
- **"Practicing hospitality."** Having open homes.
- **"Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not."** Ever tried this one?
- **"Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."** Share with others emotionally. Empathize.
- **"Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly."** We are all brothers, of the same Father, loom of the same Spirit.
- **"Do not be wise in your own estimation."** If others don't recognize your wisdom, maybe you don't have any yet.

Practice the items on this list until you get so used to them that they are 'second nature.' This will keep you out of trouble for a little while, anyway. Enjoy!

Overcoming Evil

It just doesn't seem like *good* even has a chance. It can't lie; it can't steal; and it can't commit murder. The powers of violence and deception lie in the hands of those who work on the side of darkness, and it seems that those who try to function in the realm of what is good and right and true are at a grave disadvantage. But light from our wise heavenly Father beams through the darkness, offering us this sage counsel:

- **"Never pay back evil for evil to anyone."** Our natural tendency is to even the score. But there are some interesting emphases in this line. *Never* lets us know when we can get even. *Pay back evil for evil* lets us know that God always wants us to do good even when evil is being done to us. To *anyone* lets us know that even in extreme cases, with extremely evil people involved, *God* still wants us to practice the Golden Rule.
- **"Respect what is right in the sight of all men."** Right and good need our continuing support. The way in which a Christian shows he really respects *right* is to practice it in the face of extreme pressure to do wrong.
- **"If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."** It is pretty difficult to be at peace with all men when you are preaching and teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. When men haven't done what God wants them to do, or have no intentions of doing what God's word tells them to do, their tendency is to react with violent or aggressive behavior toward the one who is bringing the word. But there is no reason for the Christian to get involved in the petty differences, which cause the breakdown of peace.
- **"Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."** Vengeance belongs to the Lord. And as its owner, God has told us to keep our hands off it. Our function in the partnership is to keep on blessing those around us, and let God handle the vengeance when the need arises.
- **"But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head."** God wants us to have the internal sense of control, which comes through renewing the mind so that we can maintain a positive outlook towards our enemies. He wants us to always remember the intrinsic value of the human soul, even in the body of an enemy.
- **"Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good."** It is possible for evil to wear on a Christian long enough so that he eventually gives up, and says, "If you can't lick 'em join 'em." But our heavenly Father injects hope into our lives by pointing out that good can eventually overcome evil!

Let us renew our minds so that instead of being like the world, and becoming involved in the circle of "evil for evil for evil," we can break the cycle, and overwhelmingly conquer by doing good.

The Wild Olive Branches

What price shall we put on a soul? Were all the gold and silver in the world to be dumped in one pile, would that be worth the value of the soul of one young child, or one crippled old man? The Son of Man came to seek and save lost souls, and those who come to repentance are the cause of rejoicing in the halls of heaven. When a man turns to the Lord, it is as if one who was dead has come back to life.

So what was the Gentile Christian's attitude to be toward the persecuting Jew who now was immersed into the body of Christ? What about those Jews who were temporarily blinded to the gospel so that the Gentiles could come in? What about those of Israel who were made jealous through the Gentiles speaking of the mighty things of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and who then investigated the claims of Jesus and found them to be true?

- If their rejection of Christ be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead
- God selected for Himself a people to bring out of Egypt and preserved a remnant of that people. If the first piece of dough be holy, the lump is also; if the root is holy, the branches are also. Those Jews who were coming into Christ were the holy remnant – the branches of Israel
- If some of the branches were broken off [those Jews who did not obey the gospel] and you [Gentiles] being wild olive branches, were grafted in among them and became partakers with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you start to become arrogant, remember that it is the Israelite root who supports the olive tree, and not the Gentile branches who support the root.
- You might say, as a Gentile Christian, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” Quite right, says Paul. They were broken off because of their unbelief. You then, as Gentiles, who stand by faith or belief in the gospel of God need to not be conceited but be afraid; if God did not spare the natural branches when they did not believe, He won’t spare you either if you fall into disbelief.
- Consider both the kindness and severity of God. To those Jews who fell - severity To you Gentiles who became Christians, kindness; if you continue in His kindness - otherwise you will be cut off.
- Those Jews who do not continue in their unbelief will be grafted in again
- God is able to graft them back into their own tree again. You Gentiles we cut off from a wild olive tree and grafted contrary to nature into a domesticated olive tree. How much easier is it to graft the Jews, the natural branches, into their own olive tree?

It is by God’s grace that there even is an olive tree. Let us rejoice in anyone who turns to Christ on His terms. Let us welcome with open arms and gracious love male or female, slave or free, barbarian or Scythian, anyone who chooses by faith to have God graft him into the olive tree