

Bible Basics: Essential Doctrines of the Bible

Part 6B

Ecclesiology

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by Dr. Robert D. Luginbill

The Church of Jesus Christ

On this Rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

Matthew 16:18 NKJV

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I. The Universal Church

A. Definition of the Church

What is the Church? It is not a building. It is not an organization. It is not a denomination. It is not composed of people who claim to be "Christians" but who are not in fact born again, born from above, given new birth by the Spirit by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The Church, the genuine Church of Jesus Christ, is composed of all true believers in Him from Adam and Eve to the last person saved before our Lord's second advent return when we, His Church, His Body, His Bride will be resurrected and rise to meet our Lord in the sky. And so will we ever be with the Lord (1Thes.4:17). *We* are the Church of Jesus Christ, we who believe in Him. And we are His Church regardless of what organization we may belong to (or not) and regardless of what physical building we attend to worship Him (or none). We belong to Him as His Body, as His Bride, and He is the one who is due all of our loyalty, not any human being, nor any human organization, whether church or denomination.

For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. (31) "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." (32) This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the Church.
Ephesians 5:30-32 NKJV

And He is the head of the body, the Church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.
Colossians 1:18 NKJV

1. Etymology and Meaning of the word Church

Given the above, the first issue of interpretation that needs to be addressed is the distinction between *the* Church, the entire Body of Christ composing all believers, and *a* [local] "church", a local assembly of believers who come together for spiritual growth and encouragement through the truth of the Word of God (Heb.10:24-25). Since these latter, local assemblies are mirrors of the much larger, ultimate assembly, scripture employs the same word for both: *ekklesia* (in the Greek New Testament: ἐκκλησία; cf. English "ecclesiastical"); and this usage is reflected in most major English translations of the Bible, where the word "church" is generally used wherever *ekklesia* is found, whether the subject is a local church or *the* Church universal.

In terms of Greek etymology, the word *ekklesia* has a very storied history in ancient Greek usage. Derived from the verb "to call" and the preposition "out of", *ekklesia* is the same word used for the assembly of enfranchised citizens in the classical Greek city-states. These twin notions of special selection and special privilege can also be seen in the adjectival form *eklektos*, cognate in form and meaning with the Latin word from which our English word "elect" is derived.

The Church is thus properly the universal assembly of *all* who have chosen to faithfully follow Jesus Christ during the first six millennia of human history, a select few (by grace through faith, Eph.2:8-9), an elect group called by God out of the devil's world and into His own family. This is not only clearly to be seen throughout the New Testament (cf. Matt.22:14; Rom.8:33; 1Cor.1:27; 1Thes.1:4; 1Pet.1:1; Rev.17:14), but is also consistent with the picture given by the Old Testament as well, where the word *ekklesia* is the standard translation for Israel's assembly the *qahal* (קהל) in the ancient Greek version.

As is often the case with technical vocabulary in the New Testament, the influence of the Old Testament, and in particular the word choices made by the translators of the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (a.k.a., the LXX), is significant and revealing. The word *qahal* stresses the idea of being assembled (and is translated "assembly", *ekklesia*, 95 times in the NASB version), while the other term for the gathered people of Israel, *'edah* (עדה), stresses the idea of having been called out to go to the appointed place (translated "congregation" 126 times in the NASB version). For this latter term, the Greek version mainly uses *synagoge*, the source of our word "synagogue" (compare Heb.10:25 "the synagogue-ing of yourselves together"). That the two Hebrew terms are virtual synonyms is apparent from the Septuagint's treatment of Numbers 16:2-3 where both Hebrew terms are translated with *ekklesia*. The Greek word *ekklesia* was thus a natural term for translating both *qahal* and *'edah*, since both notions (i.e., of being called out and of already being assembled) are resident in the word *ekklesia*.

Central to the idea of our "election" into this assembly, the Church, is the purpose for it. We who are elect are so because of Him who is the elect, Jesus Christ, and it is for Him that we have been chosen out of the world, to share eternity together, assembled forever with the chosen One (compare Is.42:1 with Is.44:1; and cf. Lk.9:35; 23:35; 1Pet.2:4):

(18) Though the world hates you, know that it came to hate Me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own. (19) Now because you are not [a part] of the world, but I *chose* you out of the world, for this reason the world hates you.
John 15:18-19

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing heaven has [to offer], seeing that even before the world was founded He *chose* us in Him to be sanctified and blameless before Him.
Ephesians 1:3-4

This, then, is the true meaning of the Church, the select assembly of Jesus Christ, formed and chosen for Him from every age of human history until our Lord's return, in order to produce His special and unique possession, His assembly, His Bride, the Church.

We should point out here in passing that the English word "church" (which bears no direct relationship to the word *ekklesia*) is generally thought to be an anglicized form of the Scottish word *kirch* (though its actual journey into English is somewhat debatable). However the word "church" made its way into the English language, it is almost certainly a transliteration of the

Greek word *kyriake* (or *kyriakon*), meaning "belonging to the Lord (*kyrios*)", with the word "house" to be supplied. A local "church", etymologically in English then, is "the Lord's house", speaking of a particular building rather than the people who may belong to the fellowship which meets there. That is a significant departure from the biblical meaning of *ekklesia* which refers *not* to any building, but to the assembled Christians themselves, whether locally (wherever they assemble at any given time, whether inside a building or not), or collectively – and we shall all assemble together as the entire, completed Church for the first time when we rise to resurrection to "meet the Lord in the air" on the occasion of His second advent return (1Thes.4:17).

In *biblical* terms, therefore, both the universal Church of Jesus Christ as well as every local assembly or local church is defined as being composed of *believers* – and neither has anything to do with buildings. That is an important point to keep as we proceed through this study . . . because to the world at large and to the church-visible of the lukewarm era of Laodicea the word "church" means "special building" first and foremost – but not in the Bible, and not to the Lord.

One final observation about the Greek and Hebrew terms for "Church" and the ancient institutions to which they refer: the secular Greek *ekklesia* was originally an assembly of warriors, with military service being the basis for the franchise of privilege the assembly possessed; similarly, the Hebrew assembly was composed of military aged men, and the organization of the tribes with their encampment and marching order was entirely military in its presentation and purpose. Thus, in spiritual terms, every believer in Christ's *ekklesia* is a spiritual warrior by definition. We are His Church, His army . . . and all the military defenses of the devil cannot prevent us from prevailing in this unseen conflict in which we are presently engaged.¹

On this Rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.
Matthew 16:18 NKJV

2. Composition of the Church

(22) But you have come [not to Mount Sinai but] to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, [that is, you have come to] the Heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of [elect] angels in assembly [before God], (23) and to the Church of the firstborn enrolled [as its citizens] in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of justified [believers] [who have now] completed [their tasks], (24) and to Jesus, the Mediator of a better covenant, and to sprinkled blood (i.e., the work of Christ in bearing our sins) which speaks [far] more powerfully than that of Abel[’s sacrifice].
Hebrews 12:22-24

As can be affirmed from the passage above, after death believers go directly into the presence of the Lord in the third heaven, and so has it been since Christ's resurrection and ascension – at which point He "led captivity captive" (Ps.68:18; Eph.4:8) and brought the spirits of all

¹ For more on this please see the five part *Satanic Rebellion* series.

previously deceased believers along with Him as well.² That being the case, it is hard to understand how anyone reading the passage above could take issue with the truth, clear also everywhere in the Bible, that the Church consists of *all* believers from Adam and Eve to the present day (and to the last person saved before Christ's return when His Bride is resurrected).

(39) And through their faith, all of them (i.e., the catalog of great Old Testament believers starting with *Abel*), though they became witnesses [to the world] (lit., "were martyred"), yet they did not receive the promise (i.e., resurrection and reward), (40) since God was looking forward for our sakes to something better, so that they might not be made perfect (i.e., resurrected and rewarded) without us.

Hebrews 11:39-40

Schools of interpretation which treat Jewish believers of the Age of Israel as not being part of the Church are therefore in serious error. There are significant differences between the Age of Israel and that of the Church, as well as biblical distinctions between Jews and gentiles – but we are all "one" in Jesus Christ as part of His Church or assembly (Rom.10:12; Gal.3:28; Col.3:11; cf. Eph.2:11-18).

"[Moses] was in the assembly (*ekklesia*, "church") in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us."

Acts 7:38 NIV

The passage above is illustrative of this point because it demonstrates that the "assembly" we call the Church is deliberately patterned on the assembly of Israel (*qahal / 'edah*). God's people, during the time of Israel, were localized geographically. The fact that such is not the case today does not equate to there being some wide theological gap between "Israel and the Church" so as to divide the believers within the two. In fact Israel *is* the Church and the Church is Israel, with all believers from the time of the expulsion from Eden until the 2nd Advent being equally part of the Body of Christ (cf. 1Cor.15:23b).

Brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery (and so think more of yourselves than you should): hardness has come over a part of Israel ***until the time when the fullness of the gentiles has come in*** [to the family of God] (i.e., when the Church is completed at the 2nd Advent; cf. Mk.13:10; Lk.20:16; 21:24; Rev.10:7; 11:2).

Romans 11:25

This is not to say, of course, that there are not differences between Jewish and gentile believers, whether in the past or presently. Nor is it to say that God's administration of His kingdom on earth was not significantly different during the days before and after the cross – indeed it most

² See BB 4A: Christology, section II.5.o.3: "The Transfer of Believers from the Subterranean Paradise to the Third Heaven".

assuredly has been. But this difference in *administration*, in God's "dispensation" of the truth³, is not the same as finding a significant difference in eternal status between believers who lived before versus those who have lived after the cross: whether then or now, we are all part of the Body of Jesus Christ, His precious Bride – and we will all be resurrected together as one assembly when our Lord returns (1Thes.4:13-17).

[And the mystery is this]: that the gentiles are [now] fellow heirs, members of the same Body, and equal partakers of the promise [of salvation to Israel] in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Ephesians 3:6

Gentiles are now joined with Jews into one Body, the Church, and in fact, as the verse above shows, it is indeed we gentiles who are blessed now to partake in Israel, not the other way around.

(17) So even if some of the branches have been broken off, and you, wild olive branch that you are, have been grafted into their place and have become a partaker of the rich root of the natural olive tree, (18) don't boast over those branches. For if you boast, [remember] that you don't support the root, but the root supports you. (19) Now someone may say, "Branches have been broken off for me to be grafted in." True enough. (20) They were broken off because of their unbelief, and you stand secure because of your faith. But don't think arrogant thoughts. Rather, have a care. (21) For if God didn't spare the natural branches, He will not spare you either. (22) So consider God's mercy and severity. For He is severe towards those who have fallen away, but merciful towards you – if, that is, you continue in that mercy. (23) But if you don't, you too will be cut off. And if they don't continue in their unbelief, they will be grafted back in.

Romans 11:17-23a

The New Jerusalem's twelve gates will each be named for one of the tribes of Israel (Rev.21:12-13), and these represent the ultimate organization into which we believers will all be grouped in eternity depending upon the quality of our service here in this life.⁴ On that glorious day we, the Church of Jesus Christ, all believers from Eden to the Second Advent, will be "one" in Him in every experiential way – just as we are today by virtue of our status of being "in Christ" one and all (e.g., Jn.14:20; 15:1ff.; Rom.16:7; 2Cor.5:17; Eph.2:6; 2:10; Heb.3:14; 1Pet.5:14).

(9) Then one of the seven angels who have the seven bowls filled with the seven final plagues came [up to me], and he spoke with me, saying, "Come. I will show you the

³ For the distinction between the dispensations employed respectively in the Age of Israel and in the Church Ages, see section I.B below.

⁴ See SR 5: "The Seven Millennial Days of Human History", under "Israel is the ultimate organization".

Bride, the Lamb's wife". (10) Then he carried me in the Spirit to a mountain, great and high, and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God.
Revelation 21:9-12

Our true "citizenship" is "in heaven" (Phil.3:20-21; cf. the Greek texts of Acts 23:1; Eph.2:19; Phil.1:27 where the verb *politeuo* means to "act as a responsible [heavenly] citizen), and is valuable beyond understanding. That precious citizenship entails the right to dwell in the ultimate "city state" (*polis*), the New Jerusalem where the Lord Himself has prepared a place for us (Jn.14:1-4; cf. 2Cor.12:2-4; Gal.4:26; Heb.11:8-10; 11:13-16; 12:22-23; 13:14; Rev.21-22). As those who belong to Jesus, our names are enrolled forever therein (Heb.12:23), and there, in New Jerusalem, we, the Church, will assemble in resurrection before our God and Father and our dear Savior the Lord Jesus Christ for all eternity. That is the hope, the legacy, and the eternal reality for the entire Church, for all – both Jew and gentile – who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ, since Adam and Eve donned the coats of skin which spoke of His coming sacrifice until the last person puts his/her faith in Him before His blessed appearance when He returns for us (Matt.24:29-31).

That we, the Church, are the divine equivalent of an enfranchised citizen assembly is an important principle to keep in mind for a proper perspective in loving our brethren: we are, one and all, members of the same assembly, the same army, the same elite unit, having one and the same purpose, to glorify Jesus Christ, our true Ruler, our true Commander in Chief, throughout our Christian lives in this world. As part of His elect, we, Jewish and gentile believers from the Gentile, Jewish and Church Ages, will enjoy each others' company in our true city-state, the New Jerusalem, for all eternity. That being the case, we should ever be motivated to help each other "soldier on" in this life in our spiritual growth and production as best we can, through the generous application of the gifts we have been given in the particular ministries to which we have been called.

We should also be leery of seeing any of these wonderful attributes as applying only to a specific local "church". Contrary to the divisions in the church-visible here on earth, believers should always strive to keep in mind that the true Assembly, the true Church of Jesus Christ, is the one to which we all belong, regardless of our present day divisions, denominational or otherwise, regardless of our patrimony, whether Jew or gentile. All who have believed in Jesus Christ for salvation from the beginning of history until our Lord's return are the one, true Church, the one which will rise together in resurrection at our Lord's return, the one which will assemble in the New Jerusalem forever, the one whose present day edification and future reward depends upon hearing, believing and applying the Word of God – not in belonging to some group attending some steeple-topped building for what are usually, however unfortunately, pointless rituals, one day out of the week.

3. The Body and the Head

(22) And [the Father] subordinated all things under [Christ's] feet and gave Him [as] Head over all things in the Church (23) which is His Body, the fullness of the One who

fills up all things in all ways.
Ephesians 1:22-23

This blessed biblical metaphor tells us a great deal about our relationship to Jesus Christ and to our fellow believers. Just as the head rules the body, so Christ rules the Church. Just as the head is aware of how the body is functioning, so nothing is hidden from Him who is our Head. Just as the body's proper task is to support the decisions and activities which the head chooses, so the Body of Christ is here on earth to carry out the will of God and to please our Master Jesus Christ. And just as the head directs the body to care for itself in its health and welfare, so our perfect Ruler knows what is best for us all, individually and collectively, and would never abandon or forsake any part of His Body, no matter how small. This metaphor also communicates to us an obvious truth which the church-visible finds easy to ignore: the body is only healthy and effective when all of its parts are functioning properly with each doing its part to contribute to the welfare of the whole. This is what we all strive for in terms of our own bodies. Failing to recognize how important bodily health is to our Lord – the health of His Body the Church – is a grave oversight. And while the physical body is nurtured and cared for by physical means, the Body of Christ is meant to nurture itself by spiritual means, with each of us responsible for one another as intimate parts of the Lord's Body, carrying out our responsibilities to Him and to one another through the application of our various spiritual gifts:

(26) If one part [of the Body] suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. (27) Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.
1st Corinthians 12:26-27 NIV

(15) . . . but rather that we may, by embracing the truth in love, grow up in all respects with Christ, who is ***the head of the Church***, as our model. (16) In this way, ***the entire body of the Church***, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, ***works out its own growth*** for the building up of itself in love.
Ephesians 4:15-16

(18) Let no one gain control over your life, desiring to [enslave you to himself] through a show of false humility and the adoration of angels, basing his approach on what he has [allegedly] seen while puffed up by his own fleshly thoughts, (19) yet not embracing ***the Head [Christ]***. For it is from this Source that ***the entire body [the Church]*** is [truly] supplied and instructed through [all] its joints and sinews (i.e., each believer functioning in our personal ministries to one another), and [thus] produces the growth that God has given.
Colossians 2:18-19

When we are saved, believers are baptized into Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, becoming one with Him and with each other forevermore (1Cor.12:13; Eph.4:4). From that point forward, we believers are now intimately part of the Body of Christ, intimate parts of Him, belonging to Him,

our Head, and to each other, members of His Body, for all eternity (Rom.12:4-5; 1Cor.6:15; 10:17; 11:13; cf. Matt.26:26; Mk.14:22; Lk.22:19; 1Cor.10:16; 11:24; Eph.1:22; 2:16; 3:6; 4:4-6; 4:12; 4:16; 5:23; 5:30; Col.1:18; 1:24; 2:10; 2:19; 3:15).

(12) For just as the body is one and has many members, and the members of the body, though many, are [yet] a single body, so also is Christ. (13) Indeed, we were all baptized by [the] One Spirit into [that] one Body, whether Jews or Greeks (i.e., gentiles), whether slaves or free men, and we have all been given to drink of [the] One Spirit.

1st Corinthians 12:12-13

And He Himself is the Head of the Body, [that is,] the Church. [Even] He who is [its] Ruler, the Firstborn from the dead, [thus resurrected] to the purpose that He Himself might become the One who occupies the first place in all things.

Colossians 1:18

I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church.

Colossians 1:24 NKJV

Being the Body of Christ, let us all then make it our heart's desire to respond daily to Him who is our Head, Jesus Christ our Lord and Master, serving each other in that Body as He would have us to do, for the purpose of our bodily growth, individually and collectively.

4. The Bride and the Husband

(25) Husbands, love your wives as also Christ loved His Church and gave Himself over [to death] on her behalf, (26) so that He might sanctify her, having purified her by the washing of the water [of truth] in [His] Word. (27), so that He might Himself [and] for Himself present His Church in glory, without spot or blemish, but so that she might [instead] be holy and without blame.

Ephesians 5:25-27

At salvation, all believers become part of the Bride of Christ by means of the Spirit's baptizing of us into union with Him so as to be one with Him forever. As the eternal complement of our Lord, we believers, the Church of Jesus Christ, are destined and designed to be with Him for all eternity (Matt.9:15; Matt.25:1-13; Mk.2:19; Lk.5:34; Jn.3:29; Rom.7:1-4; 2Cor.11:2-3; Eph.5:22-33; Rev.19:7-14; 21:2-4; 21:9ff.; 22:17; cf. Ps.45:9-17; Song of Solomon *passim*; Is.54:1-15; 1Cor.6:15-17). We are eternally part of Him as His Bride, washed of our sin by His blood, loved, cherished and possessed by Him in a way that even a perfect human marriage could only dimly approximate (Eph.5:25-32; Rev.19:7).

The Bible throughout pointedly compares the relationship between Christ and His Church to the marriage of a husband and a wife (cf. the Song of Solomon). For example, after describing the wife's duties of obedience towards her husband and the husband's duties of love towards his wife

(Eph.5:25-32), in the final verse of the section cited Paul admits that this is a great "mystery", but, rather unexpectedly, informs us that he has been speaking all along primarily about Christ and His Church, and only about the earthly relationship between husband and wife by way of analogy. Thus the intimate relationship between the Savior and His saved is so close, so intense, that it is not too strong a statement to say by way of inference that the whole idea of marriage (something unique to human beings: cf. Lk.20:35-36) was designed by God for mankind in order to teach us about the fundamental and essential tenet of His plan for all of human history: the incarnation and sacrifice of His Son (the loving husband) for the salvation of His Church (the faithful wife). For it is certainly fitting for the most fundamental and original human institution (marriage, consecrated in Eden before the fall: Gen.2:18-24) to mirror and reflect His most fundamental and central purpose for human history as He constructed it: the saving work of Jesus Christ and the calling out of His Church.

Jesus is the Last Adam, and we, the Church, are, so to speak, His "Eve" (1Cor.15:45; 2Cor.11:2-3; cf. Rom.5:14). Jesus died for us, purchasing us from death with His blood, His sacrificial work in dying for our sins on the cross (1Cor.15:3; 2Cor.5:21; 1Pet.2:24). Having been purchased in this unique way and at an ineffable bride-price (1Pet.1:18-19), we belong to Him forever and will be wedded to Him as His Bride forever on His return (1Cor.15:23; 1Thes.4:13-18). We are the "joy that was set before Him" as He anticipated the fiery ordeal of the cross (Heb.12:2; cf. Jn.15:13; Eph.5:25-27) – we are the prize for which He strove, and an important part of the glorification He now enjoys (Ps.45:9-17). This aspect of His glorification could only come to Him in His humanity after He had won us for Himself through His death for us on the cross (Matt.20:28; Gal.1:4; 2:20; Eph.5:2).

Thus the whole purpose and reason for history (salvation for the Church through the Person and work of Christ) is reflected in what is, apart from mortality, arguably the dominant human concern in this life, namely, the marriage relationship. And in every marriage relationship we learn something about the greatest of all mysteries, the great love of Jesus Christ and the faithfulness of His Church. This is true notwithstanding the weakness of our flesh and the resultant imperfect nature of human relationships here in the devil's world. Do men fall short of the perfect standard of Christ's love? Of necessity, they all do (only the degree is in question), but we can learn about the wondrous nature of Christ's perfect love by comparison to the imperfections of every husband we meet: every human lapse reminds us of our divine Husband's perfection. Do women fall short of the perfect obedience and faithfulness that the perfect love of Jesus Christ is due from His Church? Every such instance is a reminder of the perfect responsiveness due to our heavenly Husband. Even the Church itself, that is, the part which remains in these bodies and in this world, is far from perfect in these respects. But it should be noted with care that, in respect to Christ, we as the Church, women and men, find ourselves in the woman's role, and are called upon to manifest the same submissive obedience and faithfulness toward God demonstrated by Christ during His sojourn on the earth, humbling Himself even to the point of total humiliation and death on the cross (Phil.2:5-8).

And so we can learn from observing any wife something not only about the relationship of the

Church to Christ in general, but also (and very importantly) about our individual relationships to Christ. Do we observe a wife who is extraordinary in her duties toward her husband? We examine our own performance toward the One who bought us with His blood and should be challenged to be found likewise in His eyes. Do we observe a wife who in our estimation falls far short of the biblical standard? We would do well to consider our own performance toward Christ and His forgiveness and faithfulness in the face of our rebellious behavior. In short, by applying the analogy of marriage, we learn about who Christ is and what He would have from us, and we learn about our true priorities and His estimation of our behavior. This is indeed a great mystery, revealed now to the Church through Jesus' chosen apostles, the close consideration of which can help us to know our Master better and bring us closer to Him by making us better servants for Him.

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.
2nd Corinthians 11:2 NIV

Just as the first Adam was espoused to Eve by God, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, so the Church is the Bride of the Last Adam, Jesus Christ (1Cor.15:45; cf. Rom.5:14), the perfect complement to Him, designed for Him, and destined to be one with Him forever.

(7) "Let us rejoice and be jubilant, and let us give glory to Him, because the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His Bride (lit., "wife"; cf. Rev.21:9) has prepared herself. (8) And it has been given her to wear a pure, resplendent [gown] of the finest material (now this fine material represents the righteous acts of His holy ones [believers])." (9) And [the angel] said to me, "Write this down: Happy are those who have been called to the [wedding] supper of the Lamb! These [words] of mine are the true words of God."
Revelation 19:7-9 (cf. Ps.45:9-17)

5. The Living Stones and the Rock of Foundation

While church buildings mean nothing to God, the Church is frequently described metaphorically as a structure, one built not with human hands, but by God Himself, with each believer being an integral "brick" in the perfect structure, and with Christ Jesus being its foundation and cornerstone.

And I tell you that you are Peter [the little rock], and upon this [mighty] Rock (i.e., upon Christ Himself; cf. 1Cor.3:11) I shall build My Church (cf. Dan.2:44-45), and the gates (i.e., the fortified defenses) of Hades (i.e., the devil's kingdom) will not [be able to] resist it.
Matthew 16:18

As is patently obvious to any true believer, Jesus Christ is the Rock upon which we, the living

stones, are being built into the complete Church.⁵ He is the *petra*, the "rocky crag" which forms the Church's true foundation, not Peter, the "little stone" (*petros*), as great as that apostle was. Like Peter, we believers are all living stones, but it is "upon *this* [mighty] Rock (*petra*)" that the Church is being constructed, just as the Lord said in referring to Himself with the word "this" in Matthew 16:18 quoted above.⁶

Trust in the LORD forever; for in the LORD, the LORD, is an everlasting Rock.
Isaiah 26:4 HNV

Jesus Christ is our Rock (Deut.32:4; 1Sam.2:2; 2Sam.22:47; 23:3; Ps.18:2; 18:46; 19:14; 61:2; 118:22; 144:1; Is.17:10; 28:16; 44:8; 51:1; Hab.1:12; Rom.9:33; 1Cor.10:4; cf. Ex.17:6; Num.20:8; Deut.32:4-37; Is.8:14-15). He is the Cornerstone of the Church (Matt.16:18; 1Pet.2:6), the "living Stone" to whom we "have come" (1Pet.2:4), and the One who is the foundation for our entire spiritual "building" (Matt.7:24-25; Lk.6:47-49; 1Cor.3:11).

(47) "Whoever comes to Me, and hears My sayings and does them, I will show you whom he is like: (48) He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently against that house, and could not shake it, for it was founded on the rock."
Luke 6:47-48 NKJV

This wonderful picture of Christ at once shows us His absolute faithfulness and reliability, while at the same time demonstrating most vividly that we have an absolute need to rely on Him and to put our faith in Him: just as a building must stand on a solid foundation, so we cannot be saved nor can we make any spiritual progress apart from being completely reliant on the One who is the absolute basis for our faith, both at salvation and ever afterwards in every forward step we take in following Him. So while "Rock" is a perfect title for our perfectly constant Savior, it also should bring to mind our intimate connection with the absolutely reliable One: Jesus Christ is the bedrock of all things in our Christian lives so that we are safe and secure whatever floods may come, just as long as we keep relying on Him.

(4) [It is Jesus] to whom you have come, a Living Stone, rejected by men, but with God elect and highly honored. (5) And you yourselves are being built up (i.e., by the Holy Spirit) into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood for the offering of spiritual sacrifices well-pleasing to God through Jesus Christ.
1st Peter 2:4-5

⁵ For a detailed explanation of the translation of Matthew 16:18 above, see footnote #28 in SR 5, "The Seven Millennial Days".

⁶ See the parallel usage at John 2:19, where with the "this" in "destroy *this* temple, and in three days I will raise it up" our Lord is clearly referring to Himself (specifically His body: Jn.2:21), and not to Herod's temple.

What is true of us as individual members of the Body of Christ is also true of the Church collectively, of which all believers are an integral part. Together we are being built into a true spiritual house one brick at a time – and that house is the Church, not a cold, dead, physical edifice, but a living, breathing, spiritually alive assembly of believers. As such, we are one with Jesus Christ, and also one with each other as every part of the building is essential to the integrity of the whole. We are all living stones in a living building whose Cornerstone is the Lord of life who gave us life eternal and made us one with Himself and with each other.

(19) So then, you are no longer strangers and hangers-on, but you are fellow citizens and fellow members of the household of God, (20) established upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Himself the cornerstone, (21) in whom the entire structure is in the process of being joined together and is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, (22) in whom you too are being built up into a dwelling place of God by the Spirit.

Ephesians 2:19-22

And just as the Church needs every individual "living stone" to be complete, so ideally every believer will build on the foundation of faith in Jesus Christ with all of the truths of the Bible, learning them, believing them, living them, standing up to the tests of life through them, and in time ministering them to others (or helping and supporting those who do). That is the proper sort of construction regarding which no workman needs to be ashamed (2Tim.2:15; contrast Lk.14:28-30):

(10) According to the grace of God given to me like a wise architect I have laid down a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each one take care how he builds upon it. (11) For no one can lay another foundation except the One that has been laid down: Jesus Christ. (12) And if someone builds upon his foundation with gold, silver, and precious stones, [or] with wood, hay, and stubble, (13) [in either case] his work will be made manifest [as to its true quality], for the Day [of judgment] will make it clear [for what it truly is], because it will be revealed (lit., uncovered) with fire. And the fire will evaluate (lit., "assay") the work of each person as to what its [true] quality is. (14) If anyone's work which he has built [on his foundation of faith in Christ] remains (i.e., is not burnt away by the fiery evaluation), he will receive a reward [for it]. (15) If anyone's work is burnt up, he will suffer the loss [of any potential reward for it], but he himself will be saved – but in this way [just described] as through fire [which evaluated his false works as worthless and burnt them up].

1st Corinthians 3:10-15

B. The Church Age and the New Dispensation of the Truth

That I might be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:16 NKJV

While the Church is composed of all believers from Adam and Eve onward, in numerical terms it is clear that the great majority of the Bride of Christ has come to consist of gentiles, flooding into the Church after the beginning of the Church Age at its inception on the day of the first Pentecost. Given Israel's obvious uniqueness in the plan of God and her special relationship with Him (Deut.4:6-8; 4:34; 7:6; 1Ki.8:53; Zech.2:8), the calling out of the gentiles in such unprecedented numbers to be part of the family of God, though foreshadowed in prophecy (Gen.17:4; Gen.18:18; Deut.32:43; Ps.18:49; 86:9; 117:1; Is.11:10; 52:15; 56:7b; Hos.2:23b), came as quite a surprise (cf. Acts 11:1-18; 15:1-21). But although the Church Age is the mystery age (see section 3 below), with the Old Testament picture seeing the eschatological future in a foreshortened view which blended the two advents of Christ⁷, the Old Testament contains more than sufficient prophetic information for us to see this mystery age even therein with the benefit of hindsight.⁸

[The Lord] will restore us, [Israel], after two days (i.e., after the Church age), and will raise us up on the third day (i.e., the Millennium), that we may live in His presence (i.e., with the Messiah, who personifies this prophecy in His resurrection on the third day).
Hosea 6:2

(16) "But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

(17) 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. (18) And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall prophesy. (19) I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: Blood and fire and vapor of smoke. (20) The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. (21) And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.' " [Joel 2:28-32]

Acts 2:16-21 NKJV

(12) Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. (13) And

⁷ See part 1 of the *Coming Tribulation* series, section IV.1.a, "Prophetic Foreshortening".

⁸ See especially part 5 of the *Satanic Rebellion* series, section II.8.c, "The Jewish Ceremonial Calendar". The pattern of Levitical sacrifices also commemorates symbolically the calling out of the six echelons of the Church which precede the Millennium, two echelons during the Jewish Age and four during the Church Age: in Numbers chapter 29, thirteen bulls are sacrificed on the first day of the festival (i.e., a base number of seven plus an initial six), with one less bull sacrificed each day until the perfect number of seven is reached on the final day, a persuasive symbol of the progressive filling up of the Church, echelon by echelon, millennial day by millennial day, until it reaches its completion at the end of the Church Age.

after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me: (14) Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. (15) And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:

(16) 'After this I will return
And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down;
I will rebuild its ruins,
And I will set it up;
(17) So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD,
Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name,
Says the LORD who does all these things.' " [Amos 9:11-12]

Acts 15:12-17 NKJV

Just as the incarnation and sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, God taking on true humanity and dying for us, is God's great strategic surprise and victory of the ages, so the filling up of Christ's assembly of believers with a flood of gentiles during the last pair of millennial days is the great "mystery" that followed in the wake of the victorious cross. Just as the final pair of Genesis days sees the re-created earth filled in earnest with a plethora of inhabitants, so the final pair of historical millennial days fills up the family of God with believers, filling up the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, to its full and complete number – the fundamental purpose for the history of the world from the divine point of view.⁹ For this was the appropriate reward or "joy" set before our Lord Jesus Christ as a consequence of that victory on the cross (Heb.12:2; cf. Jn.10:16; 11:52).

(10) For it was fitting for [the Father] to make complete through sufferings Him on whose account all things exist and through whom all things exist, namely, the Captain of their salvation, even Him who has led *many sons* to glory, [our Lord Jesus Christ]. (11) For the One who sanctifies and those who are sanctified belong to One [Father], and for this reason [Christ] is not ashamed to call them His brothers, (12) as He says: "I will proclaim Your name to My brothers. In the midst of the assembly I shall praise you (Ps.22:22)"; (13) and elsewhere, "I [too] shall put My confidence in Him (i.e., the Father; Is.8:17)." and elsewhere, "Behold, I and the children whom God has given Me (Is.8:18)." Hebrews 2:10-13

1. The Spirit and the New Dispensation of the Truth

"I baptize you with water (i.e., physically) for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."
Matthew 3:11 NIV

⁹ See part 5 of the *Satanic Rebellion* series, section II.8.b, "The Seven Days of Re-Creation".

(4) And gathering them together [Jesus] commanded [the disciples] not to depart from Jerusalem, but to await the promise of the Father (i.e., the Holy Spirit) "which you heard about from Me. (5) For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Spirit not many days from now".

Acts 1:4-5

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth".

Acts 1:8

(1) When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. (2) And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. (3) Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. (4) And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Acts 2:1-4 NKJV

The coming of the Holy Spirit on the first day of Pentecost changed everything. Instead of a written law, we now have the law of the Spirit (Rom.8:2); instead of a special priesthood, we are all now believer priests (1Pet.2:5; 2:9; Rev.1:6); instead of being held at a distance, we gentile believers have now been brought near (Eph.2:13); instead of a weekly Sabbath, we have a moment by moment Sabbath rest with our Lord (Heb.4:9-10); instead of the Old Covenant, we have a new one (Matt.26:28; Heb.9:15; 12:24); we have been made one with Jesus Christ through the baptism of the Spirit (Rom.6:3; 8:1; 1Cor.12:13; Gal.3:7); and we now all have the Holy Spirit indwelling us (Rom.8:9), comforting and encouraging us (Jn.14:26; 15:26; 16:7; 2Cor.1:3-7), praying for us (Rom.8:26), guiding us (Rom.8:14; Gal.5:16-25). And we have all been given spiritual gifts to aid our service to the Body of Christ (1Cor.12:7).

What did *not* change that first Pentecost, however, was the fact that the men upon whom the Holy Spirit fell that first day of the Church Age were believers in Jesus Christ before the Spirit took up residence in them and as such members of His Church even *before* this blessed event just as well as afterward. With the commencement of the Church Age, therefore, the Church did not change in terms of its composition (though of course the vast majority of its members have joined the ranks after this point rather than before). Believers were believers before the cross and after, before Pentecost and after, members of the Church of Jesus Christ before and after. What *did* change, however, was the *manner* in which God has chosen to "dispense" His truth, the Word of God, the greatest gift of all since it is the very mind of Him who is the greatest Gift of all (1Cor.2:16; 2Cor.9:15), the Word of God Himself, our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Rev.19:13); with the coming of the Spirit the manner of this dispensation of the truth has changed, both through the unveiled gospel of Jesus Christ now fully revealed for all those called to become one with Him and also to believers after salvation in the completed New Testament.

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our

hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.
2nd Corinthians 4:6 NKJV

From the strictly biblical point of view, a dispensation is a period of time characterized by the means God uses to dispense His grace and His truth for the purpose of salvation and spiritual growth. For this reason, the difference between the dispensation of Israel and that of the Church is not to be found in any sort of eternal differentiation between those saved then or now (we are all part of Christ's Church), but rather in the way in which the truth of God was/is being disseminated. That is to say, the different dispensations are *not* defined by the people within them (as every believer in the Gentile Age, Jewish Age and Church Age are all part of the Body of Christ), but by the *manner* in which God provides the gospel to unbelievers, and provides believers with the means of spiritual growth, both then and now with the purpose of expanding the Church of Jesus Christ.

(1) For this reason (i.e., the building up of the Church into a holy temple: cf. Eph.2:14-22), I, Paul, am Christ's prisoner on behalf of the gentiles. (2) And I assume that you have heard about this *dispensation* of God's grace given to me on your behalf (i.e., his mandate as an apostle to "carry Christ's name to the gentiles": Acts 9:15).
Ephesians 3:1-2

During the Age of Israel, from Moses onward, the Law and its symbolism along with the gift of prophecy carried the load of teaching the truth, with most (though certainly not all) of those joining the ranks of the Church being Jewish. During the Age of the Church, it is the completed canon of the scriptures and the indwelling ministry of the Spirit that provide spiritual nutrition (when truth is taught by a prepared pastor-teacher or spread to unbelievers by each of us or through a prepared individual with the gift of evangelism), with the majority (though certainly not all) of those being added to Christ's Body being gentiles. The special blessing of the Holy Spirit and wondrous gift of the entire Word of God have produced the explosion of believers and worldwide proclamation of the gospel we see from the very first days of the Church Age up until this very day.

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be *my* witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."
Acts 1:8 NIV

As with all things, Jesus Christ is the difference. Once Christ had been revealed to the world, following His victory on the cross and His resurrection, ascension and session – following His glorification and revelation to the world – everything has changed. The cross and its glorious aftermath is the dividing point of all human history, and so it was to be expected that things after the coming of Jesus Christ would be different from things before.

(1) God, from antiquity having communicated to our fathers in the prophets at many times and in many ways, (2) has in these last days communicated to us in a Son, [the One] whom He has appointed heir of all things, [the One] through whom He created the

universe.
Hebrews 1:1-2

Thus, the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, followed by the advent of His Holy Spirit, has brought about a revolution in the dispensation of God's grace means for learning about salvation and pursuing spiritual growth. With the explosion of grace to the gentiles and the formation of a world-wide family of God, a major change in the dispensation of truth was also required (cf. Heb.7:12). As a single family, united to Christ, the work of spiritual growth is very much now a group effort (as opposed to being the province of Levites, priests and prophets). And what makes this new collective effort to evangelize the world and lead all believers to spiritual maturity and beyond possible is the universal gift of the Holy Spirit in combination with the completed Word of God which is the very mind of Jesus Christ (1Cor.2:16).

(4) There are different gifts, but the same Spirit; (5) and there are different ministries, but the same Lord (i.e., Jesus Christ); (6) and there are different results, but the same God who brings about all results in all cases. (7) And to every [Christian] has been given a manifestation of the Spirit for the good (i.e., the edification of the Church).
1st Corinthians 12:4-7

Following the transitional, apostolic period (see section I.B.5 below), during the Church Age the dispensation of truth necessary for salvation and spiritual growth has rested almost exclusively on these twin, inseparable pillars of the Spirit and the Word, whether directly or indirectly. For all believers have the gift of the Holy Spirit (Rom.8:9), and, apart from natural revelation, all truth necessary for salvation and spiritual growth is contained in and limited to the Bible, illuminated by His ministry to us.¹⁰

But as for you, the anointing which you received from Him remains in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you [this (i.e., v.26 and previous)]. But just as His anointing teaches you about all things and is true and not false, so also as He has taught you, remain in Him.
1st John 2:27

It is important to note that in our current dispensation it is *not* "every man for himself", nor is every believer authorized and capable of "self-dispensing" the spiritual food necessary for spiritual growth. To the contrary, we the Church are the most interconnected group of believers in this respect that the world has yet seen. We are one body, and we function as parts of that body, each one of which is essential, each one of which has great need of all the others (1Cor.12:12-30).

(21) The eye is not able to say to the hand, "I have no need of you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I have no need of you!" (22) On the contrary, those parts of the [physical]

¹⁰ See BB 4B: Soteriology, section II.2, "Natural Revelation and Accountability".

body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, (23) and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, (24) while our presentable parts have no special need. But God has composed the human body in such a way as to give greater honor to the parts that are short supply (analogous to teaching gifts).

1st Corinthians 12:22-24

As those who have accepted Jesus Christ, we are all here with the same dual-objective: to grow spiritually and to help others do the same. The Holy Spirit bestows spiritual gifts upon all new believers (1Cor.12:4-11), so that through His empowerment of these gifts and His indwelling of every believer we of the Church Age have greater opportunities than ever before both for personal spiritual advance and also for helping our fellow believers grow as well. As spiritual advance in the midst of Satan's world is no easy mandate, the mutual support of the body of Christ is essential for effective, collective growth. Furthermore, since the dispensation of divine truth is no longer accomplished through prophecy (a gift that ceased once the canon of scripture was complete: 1Cor.13:8), collective reliance on teaching gifts is all the more necessary. God used inspired men to write His Book of books (2Pet.1:20-22), and now uses prepared men with the requisite spiritual gifts to teach and so to "dispense" the truths it contains (1Cor.12:27-31; Eph.4:11-16; 1Thes.5:12-13; 1Tim.5:17) – but He also uses each one of us to dispense His truth to those who do not yet know Jesus Christ.

(8) This gracious favor has been given to me, the least of His holy ones: to give to the gentiles the good news of the indescribable wealth [that is in] Christ, (9) and to enlighten everyone as to how [the truth] of this *mystery* (once hidden from the ages in God who created everything) is now *being dispensed*, (10) so that the enigmatically intricate wisdom of God might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms through the agency of the Church.

Ephesians 3:8-10

The Greek word group for "dispensing / dispensation" is *oikonomeo / oikonomia* (Eph.1:10; 3:2; 3:9; Col.1:25; 1Tim.1:4). In secular Greek, this word group has to do with the management of a household and the provision of necessities to it (cf. the English derivative "economics"). The biblical image here is thus of God's household, the Church, being provided for not with physical but with spiritual food.

During the Age of Israel, that provision was in great part done through ritual (the temple rites) and through the shadows of the Mosaic Law (as Israel looked forward to a Savior, a Messiah, not yet fully revealed). Now that Christ has come in the flesh, however, we find a new dispensation of the truth, promulgated through the completed Word of God wherein we see Jesus so clearly, empowered by the Spirit and disseminated through the ministries and gifts of the entire Church.

It is of this new dispensation of the truth that Paul above proclaims himself a "minister" (Col.1:25; cf. 1Cor.4:1; Tit.1:7; 1Pet.4:10), literally, a "deacon", from the Greek word *diakonos* meaning "servant". Just as in any ancient household there were servants appointed to

provide all members of that household with their daily bread at an appropriate time, so also in the Church today there are ministers, servants, who are responsible for providing spiritual food. And just as then so now there are many other functions necessary for a household to function properly, with each member of the household – each member of the Church – having a role to play without which the entire household would suffer. So while previously God used different means to propagate His truth in the age before Christ was revealed, before the victory of the cross was won, before our Lord's resurrection, ascension, session and glorification, now that these blessed events are a reality it was appropriate for the truth about them to be communicated in a more powerful, full and direct way, one in keeping not with anticipatory shadows of the Law but with the reality of Christ's revelation and His gift of the Holy Spirit.

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.

Hebrews 10:1a NIV

"Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,"

Says the LORD of hosts.

Zechariah 4:6b NKJV

It is a mistake to underestimate the power and blessing of the Spirit actually indwelling us.¹¹ When he received the anointing, albeit temporary, the change in Saul was so pronounced that he became, as it were, "a different person" (1Sam.10:6); and the difference between Peter prior to and directly after the first Pentecost preaching the Word in power to the assembled multitudes is profound. The amazing expansion of the Church of Jesus Christ during the two thousand years which have followed is directly attributable to the Spirit's more direct, personal and intense ministration, empowering the sharing, the teaching, and the application of the truth of the Word of God. This being the case, we may well be prompted to ask why God did not offer this same ministry of the indwelling Spirit earlier during the Age of Israel.

(38) "The one who believes in Me as the scripture has said [to do], out of his belly will flow streams of living water". (39) [Jesus] said this about the [Holy] Spirit (i.e., the One who illuminates the life-giving "water of truth") which those who believe in Him were destined to receive: [at that point, however,] the Spirit was not yet [being poured out in Spirit baptism], because Jesus had not yet been glorified.

John 7:38-39

God is absolutely just and righteous, and for that reason, even though the cross was inevitable and foreordained, certain things had to await the actual propitiation of the justice of God by the blood of Christ, our Lord's spiritual death for our sins (cf. Rom.3:25). The gift of the Spirit is one of these cases. There can be no dividing of the spoils taken from the enemy until the victory is actually accomplished. And it was accomplished on the cross (Col.2:14-15; cf. Rev.5:5 where

¹¹ See BB 5: Pneumatology, section II.B.3.b, "Empowerment of the Believer".

victory at the cross gives Him the right to open the book of His ultimate revelation). It was at the cross that the Lord won His Bride for Himself (Eph.5:23-32; cf. 1Cor.6:19-20), and it is through the baptism of the Spirit that we become one with Him. All this, therefore, had to follow His glorification after the official acceptance by the Father of His victory and His ensuing session in heaven.

The Lord said to My Lord, "Sit down at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."

Psalm 110:1

As a result of the cross, the dividing point of all of history, the Church of Jesus Christ entered into its final phase, the phase of exploitation of that greatest of all victories wherein the entity which was destined to replace the devil and his angels would be completed. The Church Age is the age of the final filling up of the Body of Christ (in the same way that days five and six of the seven days of re-creation see the filling up of the earth with living creatures, mankind included),¹² in preparation for the return of the King to rule over His earthly kingdom.

And this good news (i.e., "gospel") of the kingdom shall be proclaimed in all the inhabited world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.

Matthew 24:14 (cf. Mk.13:10)

(22) And He (i.e., the Father) subordinated all things under [Christ's] feet and gave Him [as] Head over all things in the Church (23) which is His Body, the fullness of the One who fills up all things in all ways.

Ephesians 1:22-23

So while the Age of Israel saw little expansion in breadth of the Church, with Israel herself under constant pressure from satanic opposition and often threatened with spiritual and physical extinction, this defensive posture has been turned upside down into an aggressive and offensive one during the Church Age. Not that the devil and his followers are not fiercely opposing believers and all spiritual advance – for they certainly are. But with the Spirit's empowerment, the current age finds the requisite numbers of the Church – matching the devil's legions one for one – rapidly and inexorable racing toward absolute completion and fulfillment. And while it may seem to front-line Christian soldiers from the individual fox-hole perspective as if we are under constant bombardment, from God's strategic perspective the exploitation of Christ's victory on the cross is moving forward with undeterred offensive purpose toward its ineluctable conclusion.

And I tell you that you are Peter [the little rock], and upon this [mighty] Rock (i.e., upon Christ Himself; cf. 1Cor.3:11) I shall build My Church (cf. Dan.2:44-45), and the gates

¹² See SR 5: "The Seven Millennial Days of Human History", section II.8.b., "The Seven Days of Re-Creation".

(i.e., the fortified defenses) of Hades (i.e., the devil's kingdom) *will not [be able to] resist it.*

Matthew 16:18

2. The Old and New Covenants

In terms of personnel, as we have seen, all believers from Eden to the second advent constitute the Church of Jesus Christ. And while it is true that not all believers – indeed, not even the majority – are "of Israel", in eternity there will be "no more division" between Jews and gentiles (Rev.22:3; *katagma* is the correct reading in the Greek).¹³ At that blessed time, the entire Church will have become "the Israel of God" as the entire Body of Christ is reorganized into an eternal Israel (Gal.5:16)¹⁴, based upon our performance for our Lord in this life.¹⁵ And even though there are many distinctions remaining between Jews and gentiles here in this present world, this eternal unity has already been accomplished in principle.

(11) So remember that you were once gentiles in the flesh, called "un-circumcised" by those of the so-called circumcision which is fleshly and man-made. (12) Remember that you were without Christ, alienated from the polity of Israel and strangers to *the covenants* of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. (13) But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (14) For He Himself is our peace, for He has made both [Jews and gentiles] one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition, that is, the enmity between us, (15) by *discharging* the Law of the commandments and its requirements with His [own] body, so that He might re-create the two into one new Man by making [this] peace, (16) and might reconcile both in one Body to God through His cross, having by means of it abolished the enmity [between God and mankind]. (17) For when He had come [1st advent], He proclaimed the gospel of peace to you who were far away [from God], and peace to those who were near (Is.57:19). (18) For it is through Him that we both have our access to the Father by means of one Spirit. (19) So then, you are no longer strangers and hangers-on, but you are fellow citizens and fellow members of the household of God, (20) established upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Himself the cornerstone, (21) in whom the entire structure is in the process of being joined together and is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, (22) in whom you too are being built up into a dwelling place of God by the Spirit.

¹³ The translation "curse" here in most versions is incorrect; see CT 6, section VII.9, "The Tree of Life" for exegesis.

¹⁴ See SR 5, section II.8.c.IV.5, "Israel is the ultimate organization".

¹⁵ This is directly analogous to and paralleled by the reordering of the angelic clans based upon the performance of the elect angels in the conflict with Satan. See SR 4, section III.3., "Organization of the Holy Angels".

Ephesians 2:11-22

Gentile believers, while once "strangers to the covenants of promise" have now been "brought near [to God] by the blood of Christ"; for it is through His sacrifice in dying for the sins of the world that the requirements of the Law were once and for all "discharged", and as a result the barrier of division between holy God and sinful man has been removed – as well as the barrier between Jew and gentile which the Law affirmed as a witness to the world. As the passage above makes clear, it is the coming of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice in fulfilling the demands of the Old Covenant which has made everything new and brought about the unity of the one true Church of all who have put their faith in Him.

By so much more Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant.
Hebrews 7:22 NKJV

(6) But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. (7) For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second.
Hebrews 8:6-7 NKJV

In that He says, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.
Hebrews 8:13 NKJV

The meaning of and the distinction between the two covenants, old and new – which is a matter both of the original distinction between the special people of God and all others, as well as of the means God chose to dispense His truth during the Age of Israel and largely through Israel, versus the change of dispensation following the coming of Christ in the flesh and the victory of the cross – is much misunderstood. For that reason, therefore, it will be helpful here to discuss the issue of covenants in order to better understand the New Covenant and its fulfillment of the Old, as well as of the respective roles of Jews and gentiles in the Church here in this world.

I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the Gentiles,
Isaiah 42:6b NKJV

We start with the facts that the Old Covenant was truly all about Jesus Christ, looking forward to His coming sacrifice, and that He is Himself the New Covenant, for it has been instituted by His blood, His work on the cross in dying for the sins of the world (cf. Lk.22:20; 1Cor.11:25). So while there was an Old Covenant which has now been replaced (e.g., Rom.10:4), and while there is now a New Covenant which has replaced it (e.g., Heb.12:18-24), the major difference between the two – which both have to do with God's benefitting of mankind through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ – is that of anticipation versus revelation.

(23) "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. (24) God is

Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." (25) The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When He comes, He will tell us all things." (26) Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He."

John 4:23-26 NKJV

(21) But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, (22) even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference (i.e., between Jews and gentiles when it comes to salvation).

Romans 3:21-22 NKJV

Israel was given the ministry of anticipating the coming of the Savior, and the Old Covenant's main purpose was evangelical, looking forward to the Substitute who would free her and all who humbled themselves before God from sin. But "now" God has chosen to speak the word of salvation "through His Son" (Heb.1:1-2). The Church has not changed, but the dispensation has. With sin removed, the barrier between God and man has been removed by the blood of Christ. There is now no longer any need for a specialized priesthood to represent the rest of us before the Lord. We of the Church are all now believer-priests with the right to approach the Father directly.

For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law.

Hebrews 7:12 NKJV

The Old Covenant is the Law which looked forward to Christ. The New Covenant is founded on "better promises" (Heb.8:6), being the blessings that are promised to all believers based upon the reality of our Lord's victory on the cross. And while there are many important distinctions between the anticipatory ministry and the ministry of revelation, or, as Paul calls them, the ministry of "death and condemnation" versus the ministry of "life and righteousness" respectively, they have in common the central purpose of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, the One who is God the Father's "agreement" with mankind: life eternal given on the basis of trusting in Him for our righteousness.

(14) For He Himself is our peace, for He has made both [Jews and gentiles] one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition, that is, the enmity between us, (15) by discharging the Law of the commandments and its requirements with His [own] body, so that He might re-create the two into one new Man by making [this] peace, (16) and might reconcile both in one Body to God through His cross, having by means of it abolished the enmity [between God and mankind].

Ephesians 2:14-16

(13) And though you were [spiritually] dead in your transgressions and in the un-circumcised state of your flesh, [God the Father] made you alive together with [Christ], having forgiven you all your transgressions. (14) [God] has erased the charge against us (i.e., under the Old Covenant) along with its particulars (i.e., our sinful nature and personal sins) which opposed our [relationship with Him], and He removed it [as an

obstacle] between us by nailing it to the cross. (15) [For by means of the cross, God] has stripped [demon] rulers and authorities [of their power] and subjected them to public humiliation, having triumphed over them in [Christ].

Colossians 2:13-15

From the divine point of view, all history before the cross looks forward to it, and all history since looks back at it.¹⁶ The cross thus divides the shadows of the Old Covenant from the revelation of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice which constitute the New Covenant. The shadows of the temple ritual and the Mosaic Law were fulfilled in Him and His work, and have now given way to the reality of Him, resurrected and exalted at the right hand of God. Just as each human life is divided into two distinct phases, the acceptance of Christ (or rejection of God) being the fundamental turning point, so God has ordered human history in such a way that the appearance of His beloved Son to effect salvation through His death on the cross forms "the conjunction of the ages" (Heb.9:26; cf. Mk.1:15; Rom.5:6; Gal.4:4; Eph.1:10; 1Tim.2:6).

For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

John 1:17 NKJV

Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you."

Luke 22:20 NKJV

Throughout the Old Testament period, the promise of a coming Savior was clearly given by God, "at many times and in many ways" (Heb.1:1; cf. Gen.3:15; Deut.18:15; Ps.2:1ff.; 110:1ff.; Is.9:1-7; 11:1-5; 49:5-7; 52:13-53:12; Dan.7:13-14; Zech.13:1). Furthermore, the substitutionary sacrifice that He would perform on mankind's behalf was continually foreshadowed through animal sacrifice, even before the giving of the Mosaic Law (e.g., Gen.3:21; 4:4-5; 8:20-21). But the exact nature of the Messiah (i.e., that He would be human and divine), and the exact manner of His coming (i.e., that He would come twice, first as the Servant to expiate sin, second as the King to eradicate evil), were shrouded in mystery (cf. Eph.1:9-10; 3:9-11; Col.1:26-27). Scripture tells us that many Old Testament believers were eager to know what we now understand about the Messiah and His work (1Pet.1:10-12; cf. Lk.10:23-24). Nevertheless, when He finally did come to face the cross as God's humble Servant, He was rejected by His own, at least in part because He did not fulfill their kingly expectations of Him (Matt.21:9; 27:41-43; Jn.6:15). They wanted the Crown, but stumbled over the Cross (Rom.9:32-33; 1Cor.1:23; cf. Lk.7:23). Even those He chose did not at the time fully understand what He had come to do (e.g., Mk.9:31-32; Lk.9:44-45); only after His death and resurrection did the true reality of His saving work on the cross become fully perspicuous to them (cf. Jn.14:25-26). Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary's cross wrought salvation for all who had (or would) trust God for forgiveness of their sins (Rom.3:25-26).

¹⁶ I wish to credit Mr. Lynn Murray for first pointing this out to me many years ago.

As a result, we now no longer look forward to the future fulfillment of a salvation whose time and manner we can but dimly comprehend, but, possessed of a much more complete understanding of who He is and what He did for us by the shedding of His own precious blood in dying for our sins, we eagerly anticipate His return. With the coming of the Messiah in person, and His victory won at the cross an accomplished fact (Jn.16:33; Col.2:15; Rev.5:5), human history has now entered its second and final phase. No longer do we deal with shadows of what is to come (Col.2:16-17; Heb.8:5; 9:11-12; 9:23; 10:1), but we are instead direct recipients of God's amazing grace which has replaced the shadows of the Law through the reality of the God-Man Jesus Christ, based upon His sacrificial death and glorious resurrection (Rom.6:14). Today we enjoy the historical reality of the Cross even as we look forward to the future reality of the Crown, eagerly anticipating the return of our Lord and Master when He shall come in glory to take possession of His Kingdom (1Cor.1:7; 16:22; Phil.3:20; 2Thes.1:7; 2Pet.3:12).

. . . as we await our blessed hope, namely the glorious and majestic appearance of our God and savior, Jesus Christ.

Titus 2:13

These two phases of human history correspond respectively to the two covenants, the Old Covenant (or testament) and the New Covenant (or testament). The Hebrew word for covenant/testament is *beriyth* (ברית), literally, a treaty, alliance or agreement. Since these "agreements" are not made by two equal parties, but are made by God at His own instigation on our behalf, translators have always felt the need to distinguish the Old and New "*beriyoth*" (pl.) from the person-to-person or state-to-state agreements found in biblical history. But one of the main points of the *beriyth* is indeed that God, just as each party in an alliance, has chosen to bind Himself to fulfill all that He has promised – for our benefit, not for His. That is to say, if God has said it once, it is true and it will stand, but for the sake of our encouragement and perseverance, He has undertaken to give us assurances above and beyond anything we could ever deserve or ask for by formally "ratifying" His Word (cf. Heb.6:16-20).

We find this view – of a covenant essentially being a promise or collection of promises made by God on our behalf – borne out in New Testament usage in the Greek word for covenant/testament *diatheke* (διαθήκη), a literal translation of the Hebrew word *beriyth*. Throughout the New Testament, a "covenant" is likewise an agreement, and, specifically, a solemn, formalized promise or collection of promises which God has obligated Himself to fulfill (Lk.1:72; Acts 3:25; Rom.11:26-27; 2Cor.3:14; Gal.3:17; Heb.7:22; and cf. especially Eph.2:12: "the covenants of the promise").

This cup is the new covenant [ratified] by My blood which is shed on your behalf.

Luke 22:20b

As the passage above indicates, the best way to understand the idea of the covenant/testament/*beriyth/diatheke*, therefore, is in terms of God's ultimate promise to mankind: salvation through faith in the Substitute God provides to die for our sins. For the Old Covenant (really a series of promises, to Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, etc.; cf. Acts 13:23; 13:32-33;

26:6; Rom.4:13; 9:4; Gal.3:16; 3:29; 4:28; Eph.3:6; 2Tim.1:1; Heb.4:1; 6:12; 9:15; 10:36; 11:38-39; 1Jn.2:25) was first and foremost the promise of salvation (and all that it would entail), while the New Covenant is essentially the fulfillment of that promise (through Christ's incarnation, sacrifice and resurrection).¹⁷ The Old Covenant is thus a looking forward through the shadows to the New Covenant, the reality of Christ and the fulfillment of all God's promises for salvation and eternal life through Him (1Cor.11:25; 2Cor.1:19-20; 3:6; Heb.9:15):

And we are proclaiming this good news to you, the promise made to our fathers now become a reality. For this promise God has fulfilled for us, His children, by raising Jesus from the dead.

Acts 13:32-33a

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcision for the sake of God's truth, that is, to confirm the promises (i.e., covenants) made to their ancestors – and also so that the gentiles might glorify God for His mercy (i.e., in providing salvation through Jesus).

Romans 15:8-9b

From mankind's point of view, hope is always the central idea behind the promises of God solemnized in covenant form. That God has promised, sworn, and obligated Himself to provide for our salvation (Old Covenant perspective), and that Christ has accomplished and fully ratified all the promises of the Old Testament through His blood (New Covenant perspective), is indescribably encouraging news, good news, that empowers and strengthens our hope that one day we shall indeed be with Him.

(16) For men are accustomed to take oaths on the authority of something greater than they are, and there is absolutely no doubt about the fact that an oath is taken for the purpose of confirmation. (17) Just so God, out of a desire to make it abundantly clear to us, the heirs of His promise [after the pattern of Abraham's faith], that His will in this matter [of salvation and its resultant blessings] is unchangeable, guaranteed it with an oath (Gen.22:16-17), (18) so that through two unchangeable matters wherein it is impossible for God to prove false (i.e., His Word and His oath), we who have escaped [the wrath to come] and taken hold of this *hope* offered to us might have a strong basis for encouragement. (19) And this *hope* [truly] is what "anchors" our lives, so to speak: it is certain; it is solid; it penetrates beyond the [heavenly] veil into the [holy of holies] (20)

¹⁷ Thus the promised Seed of Genesis 3:15, and the Seed promised to Abraham in Genesis 12:7 find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Gal.3:16-29). So while it is common among exegetes to find numerous Old Testament covenants, from Adam (the promise of the redeemer: Gen.3:15), to Noah (the promise of continued freedom and opportunity to choose for Him: Gen.8:20-9:17), to Abraham (the promise of the Seed: Gen.12:7; 13:15; 17:19-21), to David (the promise of the Son: 2Sam.7:5-16), all these "additional" covenants serve the same purpose as the Old Covenant (otherwise known as the Law of Moses: cf. Ex.24:8), that is, to foreshadow the person and work of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

where our vanguard, Jesus, has entered on our behalf, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.
Hebrews 6:16-20

As seen in this passage, hope in the biblical sense is much different from the way the word is often used in contemporary English. Hope in the biblical sense is not an uncertainty for which we wish, but rather a certainty we cannot yet see. Secular Greek usage reflects this same idea, for the word *elpis* (ἐλπίς), refers to a likelihood about future events, a definite expectation, whether good or bad.¹⁸ In the New Testament, hope is always good, a confident anticipation about what is going to come, and, specifically, the sure and certain knowledge, belief and conviction of our salvation, resurrection, gathering together with Jesus Christ, and glorious eternity with Him. We do not see it yet, but we know for certain that through Christ's victory and our faith in Him it is only a matter of time before we actually experience the things we hope for:

(24) For it is in this *hope* [of the resurrection of our bodies] that we have been saved. Now a *hope* that is visible is not [really] a *hope*. For why should someone wait expectantly for what his eyes can see? (25) But we have set our *hope* on what cannot be seen, and so are patiently awaiting its fulfillment.
Romans 8:24-25

It is faith, moreover, that substantiates what we *hope* for. [Faith] provides proof of things unseen.
Hebrews 11:1

The Old Covenant looked forward to the coming of the promised Messiah, to the redemption of all mankind through His work (Rom.11:27). With the advent of Jesus Christ and His work on the cross now an accomplished fact, the New Covenant that God has made with all mankind includes not only forgiveness, but innumerable blessings besides, prominent among which is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Jn.7:39; cf. Is.59:21). Now that Christ has been resurrected, ascended to heaven and sits at the Father's right hand, we who believe in Him have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts as well, an unfulfilled promise from the Old Covenant perspective, but, like the coming of Christ in the flesh, a reality under the New Covenant (compare Is.44:3 and Joel 2:28 with Jn.14:14-16; Acts 2:14-21; Rom.12:5-8; 1Cor.12:1-11; Gal.4:6; Eph.4:7-13).

Jesus Christ is thus the key to the two phases of history, before and after the cross, and is Himself the central promise of the two concomitant covenants. He is the unique Prophet (Deut.18:17-19), the eternal Priest (Ps.110:4) and the promised King (Is.9:6-7). He is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises (Rom.15:8; cf. Acts 3:24-26), of the Old Covenant (2Cor.3:14; Heb.7:22),

¹⁸ The two most common Hebrew words for hope, from the roots *yachal* (יָחַל) and *qavah* (קָוָה), yield a similar result, meaning respectively "to wait for" and "to look eagerly for", stressing the idea of sure expectation of something not yet fulfilled, rather than the English notion of fantasy and wishing.

and of the Law (Rom.10:4; Heb.7:12). He is the One who has delivered us from the bondage of the Old Covenant and brought us into the freedom of the New Covenant (Gal.4:24f.). He it is who has mediated for us a better covenant than was in force before, a covenant built on better promises (Heb.8:6; 12:24; cf. Eph.2:12; Heb.9:15-16).

(6) But the fact is that the ministry which [Jesus] has received is a more excellent one to the same degree that the [New] Covenant of which He is the mediator is better [than the Old]. (7) For this [New Covenant] has been instituted on the basis of better promises. For if that first [covenant] had been perfect, an occasion for the second would not have been sought. (8) Indeed, in finding fault with [those under the first covenant, God] says, "Behold, the days are coming", says the Lord, "when I shall ratify a New Covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah – (9) not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not remain [faithful to] My covenant, and so I in turn disregarded them." says the Lord. (10) "For" says the Lord, "this is the covenant which I shall make with the house of Israel after these days: I shall put my precepts in their minds and write them upon their hearts, and I shall be their God, and they shall be My people. (11) They shall not teach each one his fellow and each one his brother, saying 'Know the Lord!', because all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them. (12) For I shall have mercy upon their unrighteous deeds and shall remember their sins no more." [Jeremiah 31:31-34]

(13) In mentioning a "New [Covenant]", He has rendered the Old one obsolete. And that which is obsolete and antiquated is close to disappearing.
Hebrews 8:6-13

Not that every promise from the Old Testament has already been fulfilled in every aspect and detail (Heb.11:39-40). Indeed, even now under the New Covenant we still await the return of our Lord and our gathering together with Him in resurrection. But all God's promises have in fact been completely fulfilled in principle through our Lord Jesus Christ's victory over sin at the cross, a victory that resulted in our redemption from sin and thus cleared the way for all the coming blessings of eternity. Therefore the actual fulfillment of all the promises to Israel and to us, our resurrection, eternal life, our reward and eternity with God in the new heavens and new earth are a reality by which we are separated only by a short span of time (and one for which we wait with eager anticipation: 2Pet.3:10-13).

And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.
Hebrews 9:15 NKJV

Covenants in general in the ancient Middle East required two parties and a formal blood-sacrifice for ratification wherein both sides agreed to abide by the terms specified. A biblical covenant is an agreement made by God on mankind's behalf, wherein God undertakes to bless all those who

faithfully follow Him. God's part is two-fold: He supplies blessing (culminating in resurrection and eternal life), and He provides the blood-sacrifice (the gift of His Son, necessary to redeem us from sin so that we may be blessed). Our part is to keep faith with Him (i.e., accepting Christ and continuing to trust Him, believe Him, obey Him, follow Him: cf. Gen.15:6).

God's covenants are formalized promises that provide those who have set their hearts on following Him with a strong basis for confident hope, because God has not only promised the eternal life and concomitant blessings we eagerly await, but has irrevocably bound Himself to fulfill them. Therefore, although part of these covenants' fulfillment is yet future (requiring those who accept God's gracious offer of salvation which is at the heart of both covenants to trust Him while waiting patiently for fulfillment after the pattern of Abraham's faith and patience), fulfillment is absolutely certain for all who embrace the promises and persevere in faith.

Both Old and New Covenants are ratified by blood: the Old through the shadow of animal blood, the New through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross where the reality of His spiritual death on our behalf and in our place is symbolized by the phrase "the blood of Christ" (Heb.9:16-22).¹⁹ God promises, formalizes the promises, and pays the most severe price to fulfill the covenants He has established – the price being the sacrifice of His only beloved Son. We benefit from His unconditional and glorious act of grace, if we but trust in Jesus and stay faithful to Him. Whether it be present day believers who partake of the communion which proclaims the completed reality of salvation through the blood of Christ (Matt.26:26-29), or believers of the past who partook of sacrificial meals "of covenant" that foreshadowed the future reality of salvation (Ex.12:1-12; cf. Gen.31:51-54), our participation "proclaims the death of Jesus until He comes" (1Cor.11:26), and so pledges our continuing faith and faithfulness. The old, shadow covenant(s) (cf. Ezek.16:60 "covenant of youth") and the memorial, "New" covenant (cf. Ezek.16:60 "everlasting covenant") thus both proclaim the salvation to which we are heirs and partakers by the work of God through our continuing faith in Jesus Christ:

(11) But Christ has already arrived [in heaven] as high priest of the good things to come, [having passed] through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, that is, the one which is not of this creation. (12) Nor was it through the blood of goats and bullocks, but through His own blood (i.e., His spiritual death) that He entered once and for all into the holy of holies, having wrought eternal redemption. (13) For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of the heifer sprinkled upon the unclean render a person holy in respect to bodily cleansing, (14) how much more will the blood of Christ, who offered Himself without defect to God through the eternal Spirit, cleanse our conscience from dead works so that we may serve the living God? (15) And it is for this reason that He is the Mediator of a New Covenant, so that those who have been called might receive their eternal inheritance on the basis of the death He suffered to redeem us from the transgressions [committed] under the first Covenant.

Hebrews 9:11-15

¹⁹ See BB 4A: Christology, section II.5, "The Spiritual Death of Christ".

I, the Lord, have called You in righteousness, and shall take You by the hand, and guard You, and appoint You a covenant for the nations and a light for the gentiles.
Isaiah 42:6

Believers during the Age of Israel, Jews and gentiles alike, received the truth about God's covenant, His sacrifice of the coming holy Substitute, through the Law and its rituals; believers in the Church Age, gentiles and Jews alike, receive the truth about God's covenant, His actual sacrifice of His one and only dear Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, through the completed Bible with its New Testament – the new covenant – showing Him clearly revealed in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our capability comes from God, who has made us capable ministers of a *new covenant* – not the one of the letter (i.e. the Law), but one of the Spirit. That is because the letter (i.e. the Law) puts us to death, but the Spirit brings us to [eternal] life.
2nd Corinthians 3:6

We are all one Church, before and after the cross; but the means through which God the Father is proclaiming the truth about His Son has changed: we are now in a different dispensational phase of the Church as befits the time following the reality of our Lord's victory and glorification at the Father's right hand; we are now in the Age of the Church per se, the time of the Spirit, the time of grace, where the rituals of the Old Covenant have been fulfilled and its mysteries revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.
2nd Corinthians 4:6 NKJV

Instead of close adherence to a very strict set of symbolic rituals as a means of dispensing the truth, the Law has now been abrogated by the reality of Christ's incarnation and work on the cross (Rom.6:14; 10:4; Col.2:16-17), that message of victory and grace, along with all of its detailed particulars, now being made clear in the New Testament authored by the Holy Spirit (Jn.14:16-17; 14:26; 2Cor.3:7-13; 2Pet.1:21). We believers are now free to accept the responsibility of spiritual growth without the burden of following the Law in all its particulars, educational as they may be (Gal.5:1; 5:13; 1Pet.2:16). For everything we as Christians need to know about God and our role in His plan is now contained in one unique book, the Bible (2Tim.3:15-17).

(8) For you have been saved by [God's] grace through faith [in Christ]; and this did not come from you – it is God's gift. (9) Nor did it come from what you have done, lest anyone should boast.
Ephesians 2:8-9

Following the reality of Christ's victory on the cross, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the commencement of the Church Age, we believers are now called to operate under grace rather

than under the Law (Rom.6:14-15); in freedom rather than slavery (2Cor.3:6; 3:17); living a life of sacrifice rather than continuing in the rituals of the Old Testament (Rom.12:1-2; 1Pet.2:5); being individually priests of God ourselves rather than requiring the intercession of others (1Pet.2:5; 2:9; Rev.1:6); instead of serving at a man-made temple, we are all, individually and collectively, a temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor.3:16-17; 6:19; Eph.2:21; 1Pet.2:5); partaking of an altar not made with human hands (Heb.13:10), and celebrating at all times the Sabbath rest we have in Christ through the Spirit instead of on specific days (Rom.14:1-5; Gal.4:9-11; Col.2:16-17; Heb.4:9-10). And in all such things, this new dispensational approach of the Church Age, the **new** covenant approach, is more glorious, relying as it does on the reality of the Holy Spirit rather than on the now fulfilled rituals of the past.

(23) "But the hour is coming, and in fact has already arrived, when the true worshipers [of God] will worship the Father in spirit (i.e., spiritually: our spirit responding to His Spirit) and in truth (i.e., truthfully: our heart responding to His truth). Indeed, it is just such worshipers that the Father is seeking. (24) For God is spirit, and those who worship Him must do so spiritually (lit., in spirit) and truthfully (lit., in truth)."

John 4:23-24

(4) So then, my brothers, you also (i.e., like a woman free to remarry on account of her husband's death) have been put to death in respect to the Law through the body of Christ in order to belong to Another, even to One who has been raised from the dead, so that you may bear fruit to God. (5) For when we were in the flesh (i.e., spiritually dead and subject to the sin nature), the passions of those sins [awakened] through the Law were at work in our [bodily] members, so that we were [ever] bearing fruit to death. (6) But now we have been freed from the Law by having died to that ["first husband"] by which we were being constrained, so that we may [now] serve [the Lord] in the **new way of the Spirit** and not in the old way of the written [code] (i.e., the Law).

Romans 7:4-6

So now, there [awaits] no judgment of condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law **of the Spirit** of life in Christ Jesus has freed you from the Law of sin and death.

Romans 8:1-2

(4) That is how much confidence we have toward God through Jesus Christ. (5) Not that we are so capable on our own account that we can claim to have accomplished all this by ourselves, rather, our capability comes from God, (6) who has made us capable ministers of a **new** covenant – not the one of the letter (i.e. the Law), but one **of the Spirit**. That is because the letter (i.e. the Law) puts us to death, but the Spirit brings us to life. (7) Now if the [Law's] ministry of death – engraved with letters written on stone – imparted glory of a type such that the Israelites were not allowed to keep continually beholding Moses' face (because this glory of his face was fading), (8) then how could the Spirit's ministry of life not impart greater glory? (9) For if the [Law's] ministry of condemnation possessed glory, then so much the more should the ministry of justification surpass it in glory. (10) In fact,

the glory of the former seems altogether lacking in glory in comparison to the surpassing glory of the latter. (11) For if what fades away has glory, then so much the more is it true that what abides (i.e. the ministry of the Spirit to believers) is glorious.

2nd Corinthians 3:4-11

The "new way of the Spirit" (Rom.7:6) means for believers today that the law of love replaces the Law of Moses (Rom.13:8), that the righteousness which comes from faith replaces the works-righteousness of misusing the Law (Rom.4:2-3), and that our sanctification is real and powerful through the Spirit (even if often invisible) in contrast to the detailed rituals of the Law, often misapplied in Pharisaical self-righteousness (Rom.1:4; 2Thes.2:13; 1Pet.1:2). Instead of a largely defensive, nation-based witness to the world based upon a formal, written code, God is now aggressively spreading the truth worldwide based upon the Spirit's witness through individual Christians, with the purpose of glorifying Jesus Christ and completing His Bride by bringing the flood of gentiles into her number, building upon her Jewish foundation.

(8) Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers, (9) and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, as it is written: "For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, and sing to Your name."

Romans 15:8-9 NKJV

3. The Mystery Age and the Mystery Complement

In the Greek, a "mystery" (μυστήριον / *mysterion*) is most commonly a cryptic rite, a ritual or arcane piece of information that only the initiates of certain cults (the Eleusian mysteries, for example) were permitted to know, a secret, in other words, that was generally hidden from all but the select few. The designation "mystery" thus perfectly reflects the particulars of both the nature of the Messiah's first advent (His incarnation and victory on the cross) and the nature of the calling out of the full complement of His Church that followed in its wake (the flooding of gentile believers into the assembly of God in completely unanticipated numbers in order to fill up the Body of Christ to the full).

It is of this [Church] that I, [Paul], have become a minister according to God's mandate given to me for dispensing [the truth] to you, in order to bring completeness to God's plan (lit., "word", Gk. *logos*), that is, [to make known] *the mystery hidden* from ages and from generations [past], but now revealed to His holy ones (i.e., believers). To all such God desired to make known what wealth there is in this glorious *mystery* regarding the gentiles, for it is that Christ – your hope of glory – is in you.

Colossians 1:25-27

Before the actual coming of the Holy Spirit, the dramatic turn of events which has so transformed the way in which God is dealing with, educating and empowering believers of the Church Age, was not anticipated before the fact even by our Lord's closest followers, the apostles. For example, we find them resisting the cross right until the point of the crucifixion (with Peter even

denying the Lord three times). And after our Lord's resurrection, we find Thomas, for example, refusing to believe that this fundamental promise had been fulfilled – until seeing Jesus with his own eyes (Jn.20:24-29; and he was not the only one to doubt: Matt.28:17). After our Lord's ascension and before the first Pentecost of the Church Age, we even find Peter and the apostles resorting to casting lots for divine guidance, something never recommended by our Lord or done before or since in the New Testament (Acts 1:26). But as soon as the Spirit fell upon the eleven, they became as if "different men" (cf. 1Sam.10:6), as testified to by Peter's powerful speech to the assembled crowd on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-39), and also by the courageous faith and testimony to the truth exhibited by all the apostles during those early days of the Church Age (e.g., Acts 4:19-20; 5:40-41). So while it is lamentable that today so many still resist the truth (even though Christ's life, sacrifice and resurrection are a reality testified to by the Holy Spirit), it is at least understandable that before the coming of the Spirit and before the fulfillment of these glorious events even men such as the disciples were slow to understand.

(10) The prophets diligently investigated and inquired about this salvation, when they prophesied about this grace [that was to come] to you. (11) For they were eager to discover the precise time the Spirit of Christ within them was signifying as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. (12) For it was revealed to them that in prophesying these things, they were not so much serving themselves as they were you – and these same things have now been proclaimed to you through those who gave you the gospel through the Holy Spirit, sent from heaven – even angels want to look into these things.

1st Peter 1:10-12 (cf. Lk.10:23-24)

The precise nature of the incarnation of the coming Messiah and His sacrifice, though present throughout the Old Testament (cf. esp. Is.53:1ff.) and in the rituals of the Mosaic Law, was nonetheless largely veiled to the eyes of those who lived before these events transpired – as was the likewise foreshadowed truth that the Church would be expanded exponentially after the coming of the Holy Spirit through the mass inclusion of the gentiles, in order to complete the full number of Christ's Bride. This foundational truth – of Jesus Christ and His Church – was thus a mystery only fully understood after the fact.

(1) I want you to know what a great struggle I am engaging in on your behalf and on behalf of those in Laodicea and [on behalf of] as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, (2) [struggling] that your hearts may be encouraged, being strengthened by love and [led] into all the [spiritual] wealth which confident understanding [of the truth brings], [led, that is,] into the full acknowledgment (i.e., *epignosis*, "knowledge made real through faith") of **the mystery** of God the Father, [namely] **Christ**, (3) in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are **hidden**.

Colossians 2:1-3 (cf. Deut.29:29; Ps.147:19-20; Is.45:15; 2Cor.3:12-18).

Jesus Christ is the linchpin of all human history on which everything depends, but the full reality and texture of this truth was concealed before His first advent (cf. 1Pet.1:10-12), a "mystery" before the cross, but revealed after the cross (Eph.1:9-10; 3:9-10; Col.1:26-27). The Messiah and

His coming are indeed present in Old Testament prophecy, but that He would be both man and God, and that He would come twice, first as the suffering Servant to take away sin, second as the glorious King to establish the Kingdom, were mysteries which could not be fully understood until Jesus came in the flesh and the Spirit was given. The mystery of God's solution to sin, and all of the other integrally related mysteries about which scripture speaks (the mystery of gentile inclusion in the Church preeminently: Eph.3:1-11; 5:25-32), are all revealed in the face of Jesus Christ come in the flesh, having died for us on the cross for our redemption, and having been resurrected on the third day for our justification (cf. Rom.4:25). He is the mystery – and we as His Bride, being called out since the cross in numbers sufficient to replace the devil's angels before the allotted time elapses when the second advent occurs, and we are thus all intrinsically part of that mystery as well.

(1) For this reason (i.e., the building up of the Church into a holy temple: cf. Eph.2:14-22), I, Paul, am Christ's prisoner on behalf of the gentiles. (2) And I assume that you have heard about this dispensation of God's grace given to me on your behalf (i.e., his mandate as an apostle to "carry Christ's name to the gentiles": Acts 9:15). (3) For it was through [God's] revelation that this mystery [of His calling out of the gentiles] was made known to me as I wrote you briefly before. (4) When you read these things you will be able to understand my spiritual insight into this *mystery of Christ*, (5) which was not made known to mankind in previous generations as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. (6) [And the mystery is this]: that the gentiles are [now] fellow heirs, members of the same body, and equal partakers of the promise [of salvation to Israel] in Christ Jesus through the gospel, [the proclamation of His victory]. (7) It is of this gospel that I have been made a minister by the gift of God's grace given to me through His dynamic power. (8) To me, the least of all His holy ones, this gracious charge has been entrusted: to proclaim to the gentiles the unfathomable wealth that is Christ, (9) and to shed light on this mystery, [the calling out of the gentiles] which is now being brought to pass (lit., "the dispensation" of it), though it was once hidden from the ages in God who created everything. (10) God [did this] so that [His] enigmatically intricate wisdom might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms through the agency of the Church, (11) according to His plan for the ages (i.e., history) which He has implemented in [the person of] Christ Jesus our Lord.
Ephesians 3:1-11

The passage above teaches virtually every doctrinal point scripture contains regarding the previously unanticipated calling out of the gentiles to fill up the body of Christ, a prophecy not fully understood until its implementation, and therefore a mystery, *the mystery of the Church* (when viewed from the standpoint of the Bride, the Church) and at the same time *the mystery of Christ* (when viewed from the standpoint of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ):

verses 1-2: The object of Paul's ministry through evangelizing and teaching is to implement or dispense the mystery of the calling out of the gentiles through his spreading of the gospel – which mystery was made known to Him by Christ Himself.

verse 3: The mystery, hidden in the past, was unveiled or revealed to Paul by divine agency (revelation is the counterpart of a mystery).

verse 4: Jesus Christ *is* the mystery (in this context also because the mystery, seen from Christ's point of view, includes the fulfillment of His Body, His Bride, the Church).

verse 5: This mystery has now been fully revealed to the present day apostles and prophets (who needed to know about the calling out of the gentiles in mass numbers in order to properly minister to them).

verse 6: Paul explains the mystery specifically from the point of view of the Bride of Christ, namely, the new co-equality of the gentiles with Israel (and their subsequent thronging to God through Jesus Christ).

verse 7-9: It is Paul's job to minister the mystery of this unforeseen expansion of the family of God through the gospel (which is the *whole* realm of truth about Jesus Christ and our salvation in Him and through Him); for the gospel is the proclamation of Christ's victory which has opened up the wealth of Him to the gentiles (cf. Rom.11:12; Gal.3:8).

verse 10: God's wisdom in filling up the assembly (the Church of Christ) is thus made known in heavenly places so that the devil and his angels are refuted and replaced.

verse 11: Such has been God's purpose for and plan of human history all along: the construction of His replacement assembly, the Church, a special gift for the Person and through the Person of Jesus Christ.

. in all wisdom and understanding [God] has made known to us *the mystery* He has willed (according to His own benevolent purpose which He determined in [Christ]) for administering (lit., for the *dispensing* of) this [present] *fulfillment* of the epochs: namely the incorporation of all things in Christ, things in heaven, and things on earth –
Ephesians 1:8b-10

While we now know much about the mystery of Christ and of the Church, it has not been fully revealed what we shall be (1Jn.3:2), for the glories to come cannot be fully appreciated until experienced. Therefore the final and full experiential unveiling of the great mystery still lies in the future, awaiting the day when Christ shall be fully unveiled to the world at His return, His "revelation" (Rev.1:1; cf. Lk.17:30; 1Cor.1:7; 2Thes.1:7; 1Pet.1:7; 1:13; 4:13), and we, His bride, shall be unveiled with Him (Rom.8:19; cf. Rom.16:25-26; Gal.3:23; Eph.3:5-6).²⁰

Thus God took Satan completely by surprise, and though He had given indications of future events, before the cross the great mystery was hidden – to His glory and the devil's discomfiture

²⁰ The word for "revelation" in Greek is "apocalypse" (ἀποκάλυψις / *apokalypsis*).

(Eph.3:10; 1Pet.1:12; cf. Prov.25:2; Matt.13:11; Mk.4:11; Lk.8:10; Col.2:15). Christ, now human and divine, coming to earth to die for our sins is the mystery (Col.2:1-4; 1Tim.3:16), and the miraculous completion during this age of the Church, His Body and His Bride for whose sake He died, is the converse side of that mystery (Eph.1:23), for Christ and His Church are inseparable.

As the antitype to the fifth and sixth Genesis days, the Church age reflects the refilling of the newly refurbished earth. For as the previous four Genesis days had made life habitable for the creatures placed upon it by God during the fifth and sixth days, culminating in the creation of human kind in Adam and Eve, so the Church Age has seen the arrival of the bountiful crop sprung from the seed of faith planted in the Gentile Age and sprouting in the Jewish Age. Noah alone (along with seven others) had kept this seed alive at the time of the great flood (1Pet.3:20), and the cadre of believers during the Jewish Age constituted the growing remnant of that faith as the seed grew into a plant (Ps.80:8-16; Is.5:2; Jer.2:21; Ezek.17; Hos.10:1; cf. Jn.15:1). But during the Church Age, as in the fifth and sixth Genesis days when the filling up of the world with creature life had occurred only after the favorable conditions created by the first four days – all the particulars necessary to physical life in the Genesis type – so in the antitype of human history the abundant "hundred fold" crop of salvation throughout the world which that plant is now producing, the filling up of the Body of Christ, has been occurring only after the necessary conditions have been met (Lk.10:2): the advent and victory of Jesus Christ, the Seed of promise and the Branch of Israel. The Church age is truly the "fullness of times" for in it the Church is fulfilled (Eph.1:9-10; cf. Gal.4:4), with the coming of the Holy Spirit being the key to this new dispensation of grace.

And just as the final pair of Genesis days culminates in the creation of the man and of the woman who fulfills him, so the final pair of historical days begins and ends with the Son of Man's two advents, and is taken up with the completion of the Bride for whom He died. The Church Age is thus the mystery age, because it is in this age that the mystery of Christ and of His Church has been revealed and is being fulfilled. And now, at the end of these days, the unsearchable and perfect plan of God is on the point of being fully completed, with the gap in the family of God created by the defection of the devil and his angels nearly filled up by Christ and His Church, a feat seemingly impossible before the cross and the resultant dissemination of the gospel to the gentiles, but at this late hour all but an accomplished fact, a mystery hidden and still hidden from all those whose eyes are blinded by the prince of this world, but an essential and blessed truth to all who have had the privilege of partaking of the riches of Jesus Christ:

(25) It is of this [Church] that I, [Paul], have become a minister according to God's mandate given to me for *dispensing* [the truth] to you, in order to bring completeness to God's plan (lit., "word", Gk. *logos*), (26) that is, [to make known] the *mystery* hidden from ages and from generations [past], but now *revealed* to His holy ones (i.e., believers). (27) To all such God desired to make known what wealth there is in this glorious *mystery* regarding the gentiles, for it is that Christ – your hope of glory – is in you.
Colossians 1:25-27

4. Israel in the Church

a. Predictions of Gentile Inclusion

(29) "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word;
(30) For my eyes have seen Your salvation (31) which You have prepared before the face
of all peoples, (32) a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your
people Israel."²¹

Luke 2:29-32 NKJV

"And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will
hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd."

John 10:16 NKJV (cf. Matt.22:8-9; Lk.14:23-24)

"(14) Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a
people for His name. (15) And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is
written: (16) 'After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has
fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; (17) so that the rest of mankind
may seek the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the LORD
who does all these things.' "

Act 15:14-17 NKJV

As James demonstrates above, that the gentiles would one day turn to the Lord in unprecedented numbers is a matter about which the Hebrew scriptures give clear prophetic indications (Gen.9:27; cf. Acts 9:15; 15:13-19; Rom.9:1 – 11:36; 15:15-16), something the divinely inspired writers of the New Testament understood very well through the Holy Spirit (as the parenthetical references which correspond to the following quotations indicate):

As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you [Abraham], and you shall become the father
of a multitude of nations.

Genesis 17:4 (cf. Romans 4:16-17)

And Abraham shall certainly become a great and powerful nation, and all the nations of
the earth shall be blessed in him.

Genesis 18:18 (cf. Galatians 3:8)

Rejoice, O gentiles, with His people.

Deuteronomy 32:43 (cf. Romans 15:10)

Therefore, O Lord, I shall praise You among the gentiles.

Psalms 18:49 (cf. Romans 15:9)

²¹ I am indebted to Pastor-teacher Curtis Omo of *Bible Academy* for this citation.

All the nations (i.e., gentiles) which You have made will come before You and will worship You, O Lord, and they will give glory to your Name.
Psalm 86:9 (cf. Revelation 15:4)

Praise the Lord, all you gentiles. Laud Him all you peoples.
Psalm 117:1 (cf. Romans 15:11)

And on that day the Root of Jesse shall appear, even the One who will stand as a sign for the peoples. After Him shall the gentiles seek, and His resting place shall be glorious.
Isaiah 11:10 (cf. Romans 15:12)

The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.²²
Isaiah 40:5 NKJV (cf. Lk.3:6)

Thus He shall sprinkle [with salvation] many gentile [nation]s. Kings will shut their mouths at [the sight of] Him. For those [gentiles] who had not been told shall see, and those [gentiles] who had not understood shall hear.
Isaiah 52:15 (cf. Romans 15:21)

For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations (i.e., gentiles).
Isaiah 56:7b (cf. Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46)

"And I shall say to them who were not My people, 'You are My people', and they shall say, 'You are our God.'"
Hosea 2:23b (cf. Rom.9:25-26)

"On that day I shall stand David's fallen booth back up, and repair its holes and everything else which has been trampled down I shall [also] stand up. And I shall rebuild it as in days of old, so that the remnant of mankind and all the gentile [nation]s which are called by My name may seek Him, declares the Lord who is going to accomplish this."
Amos 9:11-12 (cf. Acts 15:16-17)

b. Biblical Descriptions of Gentile Co-equality

"And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd."
John 10:16 NKJV

As this verse indicates, our Lord's teachings clearly foreshadowed the coming inclusion of the gentiles into God's "flock" (cf. Is.49:6), with His parables of the "wedding banquet" in Matthew and the "great supper" in Luke being clear indications of coming gentile willingness to enter the

²² I am indebted to Pastor-teacher Curtis Omo of *Bible Academy* for this citation.

kingdom in contrast to Jewish resistance (Matt.22:1-14; Lk.14:15-24).

"Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding.' "
Matthew 22:8-9 NKJV

"Then the master said to the servant, 'Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.' "
Luke 14:23-24 NKJV

This affirmation of gentile inclusion and equality with Israel in the Church, predicted in the Old Testament and alluded to by our Lord, is also of course frequently stated in the New Testament epistles where our collective unity with our dear Savior Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, is frequently stressed:

(1) Gentile equality is something "new":

(15) For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is significant, but what is significant is a **new creation** (i.e., Jewish and gentile believers united in Christ: cf. 2Cor.5:17; Eph.2:14). (16) And as many as walk by this standard, may peace be upon them, that is, upon God's Israel (i.e., the Church; cf. Acts 7:38).
Galatians 6:15-16

(2) Gentiles who were "aliens" during the Age of Israel (Deut.24:14) are now brought directly into the "household" along with Jewish members of the Church:

(19) So then, you are no longer strangers and hangers-on, but you are fellow citizens and fellow members of the household of God, (20) established upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Himself the cornerstone, (21) in whom the entire structure is in the process of being joined together and is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, (22) in whom you too are being built up into a dwelling place of God by the Spirit.
Ephesians 2:19-22

(3) Gentiles are now heir to all the privileges and benefits once reserved for exclusively for the Jewish nation:

(9) But you are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people to be preserved in order that you might proclaim the virtues of Him who called you out of the darkness into His marvelous light, (10) who once were "not a people", but who now are "[the] people of God", who [once] were devoid of [God's] mercy, but who now have been granted His mercy.
1st Peter 2:9-10

And He has made us a kingdom, priests of His God and Father – to Him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

Revelation 1:6

(9) And they sang a new song, saying, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain and have purchased with your blood for our God [men] from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, (10) and have made them into a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will rule upon the earth!"

Revelation 5:9-10

(4) Gentile inclusion in the Church has thus always been part of the plan of God, coming to fruition only with the revelation of the mystery of Christ in the Age of the Church:

(8) For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed (9) and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name." (10) Again, it says, "Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people." (11) And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him." (12) And again, Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope."

Romans 15:8-12 NKJV

c. Jewish Surprise and Resistance to Gentile Inclusion

He came to His own, but His own did not receive Him.

John 1:11

The rejection of the Messiah by the vast majority of those of Jewish descent, while appalling and difficult to understand, is nevertheless well-known even to casual readers of the gospels. This hardness, moreover, in the main continues to this very day, and is destined to continue until our Lord returns.

(25) Brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery (and so think more of yourselves than you should): *hardness* has come over a part of Israel until the time when the fullness of the gentiles has come in [to the family of God] (i.e., when the Church is completed at the 2nd Advent). (26) And it is in this way (i.e., coming to believe upon witnessing the Messiah's return) that all [true] Israel will be saved just as it is written: "The Deliverer will come from Zion. He will expel ungodliness from Jacob. (27) And this will be My covenant with them when I take away their sins."

Romans 11:25-27

What is sometimes not recognized, however, is that gentile inclusion is not an insignificant part of that continued resistance to Jesus Christ on the part of those of Jewish derivation. During the early days of the Church Age, when almost all of the early Christians were Jewish, the idea of

gentiles being anything more than a marginal component of the fellowship was largely incomprehensible.

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles.

Acts 10:45 NIV

(2) So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him (3) and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

Acts 11:2-3 NIV

If Israel, God's chosen people (Ex.19:5-6; Mal.3:17), the one people on the face of the earth after His own heart, did not accept Him en masse when He came to them but only in small part (Jn.1:11; cf. 1Ki.19:18; 1Cor.10:5; etc.), then how could it ever be that the gentiles, so much farther from God, would flood into His family in such unsurpassed volume as we see occurring in the Church Age? Even angels wish to look into such things (1Pet.1:10-12). The answer, as we have seen, is the special Church Age ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is the ministry of the Spirit which was behind the expansion of evangelism from Pentecost forward (Acts 2:1-41; 5:12-14; 8:4-6; 8:29; 10:44-46), the broadening of evangelistic focus beyond the borders of Israel (Acts 13:2; 15:28; 16:6; 20:28), and the massive influx of gentile believers into the family of God, which trend continues to this very day (Jn.3:5-8; 15:26-27; 16:5-11; Rom.8:2; 8:26-27; 1Cor.2:4; Gal.3:2-3; 5:16ff.; 1Jn.5:6-7).

The original line of faith (the early gentiles) and the foundation of the Church (historical Israel) antedated the coming of the Savior, but it was appropriate for the erection of the great edifice of the Church to wait upon His victory and glorification, and it is the Spirit's work to bring to completion "the joy" that Christ had set His heart upon (Heb.12:2), namely, to complete within the present two millennial days the Bride that completes Him, the Church. In the meantime, the comparable surge of Jewish belief, likewise anticipated in scripture (cf. Is.6:13; Jer.31:33-34), has not been abrogated, but is merely pending (though in every generation there is at least a remnant of believing Jews: Rom.11:5), waiting for the ministries of preparation predicted to come in the last days (Rev.7:1-8; 11:3-13), and ready to burst into full flood at the 2nd Advent of the Messiah (Rom.11:25-27).

The change of heart that brings a flood of Jews to faith in Christ (comparable to the flood of gentiles that characterizes the Church Age) will be the Messiah's actual return. When they look upon "Him they have pierced" (Zech.12:10-14; Rev.1:7; cf. Joel 2:30-32; Matt.24:30), Israel will turn to Him in numbers that will proportionally outstrip the greatest gains of the Church Age, as God purges and restores His chosen people (Ex.19:5-6; Mal.3:17), fulfilling during the Messiah's millennial kingdom all the promises He has made (Is.65:8-10; Jer.31:31-34; Ezek.20:33-38; 37:11-14; Hos.1:10-11; Mal.4:5-6; Matt.23:39; Rom.11:26). The fact that this much anticipated spiritual (and geographical) restoration of Israel would not take place immediately after the Messiah's (first) appearance, but would wait upon the completion of His Church through the calling out of innumerable gentiles, is the "mystery" we have been experiencing since His

triumph on the cross (and as a direct result of that victory: e.g., Acts 9:15; 22:21; cf. Lk.2:32; 10:17-20).

While they were listening to this, he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once.
Luke 19:11 NIV

This universal Jewish supposition that the Messiah would bring in the kingdom immediately – the failure to understand the need for a first advent wherein the Messiah must die for the sins of the world – was something even the disciples wrestled with, before and after the cross:

(21) From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. (22) Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"
Matthew 16:21-22 NIV

Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"
Acts 1:6 NIV

Thus, scripture is clear that present day Jewish disaffection with the true Messiah is based predominately upon two factors: 1) desiring the "crown in place of the cross"; that is, being unwilling to accept even the idea of a suffering Messiah because of their willful fixation upon a conquering deliverer (e.g., Matt.21:8-9; Mk.11:8-10; Lk.19:36-38; Jn.6:15; 12:13; Rom.9:33; 1Cor.1:22-25); but also significantly upon 2) jealousy over the inclusion of the gentiles directly into the family of God apart from the Law (e.g., Deut.32:21; Matt.27:18; Acts 13:43-45; 17:5; 22:21-22; cf. Matt.27:18; Lk.15:25-32; Rom.10:2).

"Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also."
John 15:20 NKJV

Given this verse, we should not be surprised at the Jewish resistance toward gentiles. After all, in spite of not having the second excuse above, not only did our Lord's generation refuse to accept Him (Jn.1:11), but they even handed Him over to be crucified on account of this same attitude of jealousy (Matt.27:18; Mk.15:10; cf. Rom.11:14). Here we have at least a partial explanation of why our Lord preached the good news almost exclusively to His Jewish brethren (with some notable exceptions: Mk.7:24-30; Jn.4:1-26): His contemporaries never had that excuse for rejecting Him and the truth He spoke. And for this reason Paul too, for example, went first to the Jews, and only after being rebuffed brought the gospel to the gentiles (Acts 18:6; 28:28).

(42) So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. (43) Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. (44) On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. (45) But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. (46) Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles."

Acts 13:42-45 NKJV

When Israel was a singular light to the world (Is.42:6), an island of truth awash in a sea of gentile paganism, circumspection regarding gentiles was not only prudent but of course ordained by the Law for the very reason of preserving the truth. But rejection of the truth on account of gentile acceptance of it is clearly turning things precisely upside down.

This "hardness in part" of Israel will abide "until the fullness of the gentiles comes in . . ." (Rom.11:25; cf. 2Cor.3:12-18), that is, until the calling out of the mass of gentile believers is complete, a process characterizing the Church Age, and a process that will continue and be completed just prior to the 2nd Advent of Christ (cf. Rev.11:2; 12:17). At the moment of His return, everything will change for Israel, and the vision of Him returning in glory will bring about a profound and glorious change of heart (Zech.12:10-14; Rev.1:7; cf. Joel 2:30-32; Matt.24:30). Until then, however, "this generation" (e.g., Matt.24:34; Lk.21:32), that is, a type characterized by hardness in their resistance to accepting Jesus Christ (Ps.12:7-8; cf. Deut.32:5; 32:20; Ps.95:10; Prov.30:11-14; Jer.2:31; 7:29), is destined to continue, a sad reality to which our Lord often referred, for example in the parables of the tenants (Matt.21:33-43), the fig tree and the husbandman (Lk.13:6-9), and in our Lord's cursing of the unproductive fig tree during passion week (Mark 11:12-25; cf. Micah 7:1-2).

(25) Brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant of this *mystery* (and so think more of yourselves than you should): *hardness* has come over a part of Israel until the time when the *fullness of the gentiles* has come in [to the family of God] (i.e., when the Church is completed at the 2nd Advent; cf. Mk.13:10; Lk.20:16; 21:24; Rev.10:7; 11:2). (26) And it is in this way (i.e., coming to believe upon witnessing the Messiah's return) that all [true] Israel will be saved just as it is written: The Deliverer will come from Zion. He will expel ungodliness from Jacob. (27) And this will be My covenant with them when I take away their sins.

Romans 11:25-27

(12) Since we have such a confident expectation of success [based on the support from the Spirit's ministry], we speak the truth unreservedly – (13) and not like the previous situation where Moses had to put a veil over his face so that the Israelites could not see that temporary glory fading out; (14) now their *hearts became hard*, and until today at the reading of the Old Covenant there is still a [similar sort of] veil remaining in place [one

which hides the true glory]; and [this "veil" which obscures the truth] is not being taken off because only in Christ is it done away with; (15) so until this present day, whenever Moses is read, this veil [of sorts] lies over their hearts, (16) but whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.

2nd Corinthians 3:12-16 (cf. Lam.3:65)

The hardness of the majority of the line of Israel during the Church Age has been since Paul's day a heavy burden on the heart of their believing countrymen (Rom.9:3; 10:1). Jesus Himself mourned their lack of belief (Matt.23:37), and predicted these "times of the gentiles" which comprise the two millennial Church Age days, when gentiles would flood into the Kingdom while Jewish belief would be reduced to a trickle (Lk.21:24; cf. the wedding banquet parable where those invited fail to come and others are brought in instead: Matt.22:1-14; Lk.14:15-24). As mentioned above, in the case of the resistant majority, two issues always seem to lie at the core of this resistance which is in such stark contrast to the preeminence of Israel in matters of faith both in the past and in the prophesied future:

a) Refusal to accept a suffering Messiah (Matt.16:21-23; Jn.6:66; 1Cor.1:22-23; cf. the desire for displays of miraculous power instead of the cross: Matt.16:4; Mk.8:11-12; Lk.11:29), and consequently tripping over the Cornerstone, Jesus Christ, and the "offense" of His cross (Rom.9:32-33; 1Cor.1:22-23; Gal.5:11; Heb.11:26; 12:2; 13:13). Somewhat ironically, Jewish non-biblical thinking at the time and since seems to imagine a Messiah who is not God but somehow more than a mere man (and verges on angel worship; cf. Paul's inveighing against this dangerous tendency in the book of Hebrews). And while it is certainly true as we have discussed above that the precise reality of Christ, God come in the flesh, was a mystery only unveiled at His first advent (1Pet.1:10-12; cf. Is.49:1-2), beyond any doubt our Lord gave indisputable proof of His deity – as did the Holy Spirit in His resurrection from the dead (Rom.1:4).

b) Resentment over the inclusion of gentiles into the family of God, being of the seed of Abraham by faith alone (Matt.27:18; Acts 13:43-45; 17:5; 22:21-22; Rom.10:2; cf. Lk.15:25-32), and, corollary to this, trust in their own righteousness from the Law instead of said faith (Rom.9:30-32; 10:3-4). This second issue is very much a post-cross problem. Jesus' earthly ministry was focused entirely upon Israel, not the gentiles, so that our Lord's contemporaries never had that excuse. They rejected Him before believing gentiles became an issue (Matt.7:6; 10:15).²³

d. The Present Jewish Remnant in the Church

I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not!

²³ The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) can also be seen in this vein, with the younger son (representing the gentiles) being resented by the older son (representing Israel); cf. also the parable of the later workers given the same wage as those who bore the heat of the day (Matt.20:1-16).

Romans 11:1a NKJV

Despite the hardness prophesied to grip the majority of the Jewish people until Christ's return, there have always been Jewish believers, even if they constitute a minority in the Church militant at present (Eph.2:20). This is the "remnant" of that chosen people which God by His grace has always preserved, even in Israel's darkest days (Ex.19:5-6; Mal.3:17).

Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, *the remnant* will be saved."

Romans 9:27 NKJV

And throughout the Church Age as well, God has always maintained the line of faith through Abraham's seed.

Even so then, at this present time there is *a remnant* [of Israel] according to the election of grace.

Romans 11:5 NKJV

The distinction, therefore, is one of grace, ever being generously supplied by the Lord to those *willing* to receive it. For of those who are physically "of Israel", only those who are spiritually "of the faith of Abraham" are truly His children (Gal.3:7-9; cf. Rom.4:9-16).

(6) But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are *not all Israel* who are of Israel, (7) nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, "In Isaac your seed shall be called." (8) That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed.

Romans 9:6-8 NKJV

(15) For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is significant, but what is significant is a new creation (i.e., Jewish and gentile believers united in Christ: cf. 2Cor.5:17; Eph.2:14). (16) And as many as walk by this standard, may peace be upon them, that is, upon *God's Israel* (i.e., the entire elect, saved human family of God).

Galatians 6:15-16

e. The Dangers of Antisemitism

From the very beginning of the Jewish race, the Lord promised to treat Abraham's descendants with special care, and nothing has happened since to abrogate these promises (Rom.11:2; 11:28).

"I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Genesis 12:3 NKJV

Scripture contains chilling examples of the fate of those who persecuted Israel (e.g., Is.10:5-27),

and dire predictions of the consequences of so doing:

No weapon forged against you shall prosper. And you shall reprove every tongue that rises up to judge you. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and My vindication on their behalf, says the Lord.

Isaiah 54:17

(8) For thus says the Lord of hosts, "In later times He [the Father] shall send Me in glory against the nations who have plundered you (for whoever touches you touches the apple of My eye). (9) At that time, behold, I shall wave My hand against them, and they will be plundered by their slaves. In this way you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent Me.

Zechariah 2:8-9

So while it is true and that 1) Our Lord's contemporaries wanted a conquering Messiah, not a suffering one, wanted a crown and not a cross (Matt.21:8-9; Mk.11:8-10; Lk.19:36-38; Jn.6:15; 12:13); that 2) "this generation" of hardness has continued right up until the present time (Lk.7:31; 11:30-32; 21:32); and that 3) non-believing Israel has received discipline from the Lord for her hardness of heart in refusing to accept their Messiah (e.g., Matt.21:18-19; 23:37-38; Mk.12:1-12; cf. Lam.3:65; Mt.27:25; 1Thes.2:14-16), this discipline is very much a "family affair", one that any wise gentile should take pains to give a very wide berth.

(19) Now someone may say "Branches have been broken off for me to be grafted in." True enough. (20) They were broken off because of their unbelief, and you stand secure because of your faith. But do not think arrogant thoughts. Rather, have a care. (21) For if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you either. (22) So consider God's mercy and severity. For He is severe towards those who have fallen away, but merciful towards you – if, that is, you continue in that mercy. (23) And if they do not continue in their unbelief, they will be grafted back in. For God is able to graft them back in again.

Romans 11:19-23

As this passage (and indeed the entire discussion in this chapter) suggests, gentiles need to be very careful about wrongly assuming that they have somehow *replaced* Israel. That is not the case however one considers the issue. First, Israel precedes the time of the gentiles now flowing into the Church during the present age. Second, Jewish believers were the root stock also in this expansion. Third, there has always been and will always be a remnant of Jewish believers during the present age. And, fourth, the very end of the age, the time of the Tribulation, will see the reassertion of Jewish leadership in the Church, as well as a significant inflow of Jewish believers (while the gentile stream largely dries up). We must never underestimate God's love for His special people, nor fail to understand the priority they enjoy as descendants of Abraham.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: *first* for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

Romans 1:16 NIV

(1) What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? (2) Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God.

Romans 3:1-2 NIV

(11) Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.

(12) But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!

Romans 11:11-12 NIV

(28) Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. (29) For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Romans 11:28-29 NKJV

With the proliferation of the gospel to the gentiles (through the agency of Israel), the Church Age is consummating the process of bringing in the promised and prophesied great expansion of the family of God, reaching its completion just prior to the Second Advent of Jesus Christ. However large the first major installment of Christ's Bride prior to the Church Age, in numerical terms it cannot compare to the massive wave of those saved which has followed in the wake of the advent and sacrifice of Him who won that salvation. It is certainly appropriate, therefore, for the Savior of us all, the One for whom and through whom the world and human history exist (Heb.2:10; cf. 1Cor.8:6), the One who is the key to and cornerstone of history and through whom we have been given the inestimable privilege of becoming sons of the Living God (Rom.9:25-26), to have the flood tide of those human beings who would be saved (in replacement of those fallen angels who would not) follow in the train of His life and death of sacrifice on our behalf, and in the train of the resurrection that assures our hope of eternal life (cf. Jn.1:16; Gal.4:4):

(10) For it was fitting for [the Father] to make complete through sufferings Him on whose account all things exist and through whom all things exist, namely, the Captain of their salvation, even Him who has led many sons to glory (i.e., resurrection), [our Lord Jesus Christ]. (11) For the One who sanctifies and those who are sanctified belong to One [Father], and for this reason [Christ] is not ashamed to call them His brothers, (12) as He says: "I will proclaim Your name to My brothers. In the midst of the assembly I shall praise you." (13) and elsewhere, "I [too] shall put My confidence in Him (i.e., the Father)," and elsewhere, "Behold, I and the children whom God has given Me".

Hebrews 2:10-13

Thus the Church Age completes what the Jewish Age began and what the Gentile Age delineated in principle, namely, the systematic, one for one replacement of rebellious fallen angels with

faithful human beings in union with the God-Man, Jesus Christ.²⁴ This progression of growth can also be seen from the scriptural analogy of the holy building, established on the essential Cornerstone, Jesus Christ (Is.28:16; Matt.16:18; Rom.9:33; Eph.2:21; 1Pet.2:4-7):

1) the Gentile age believers, a series of prototype people of righteousness, are analogous to the structure's blueprint (Heb.11:4-7).

2) the Jewish age believers, the line of Christ and the authors of the Holy Scriptures, are the structure's foundation (Eph.2:20).

3) the Church age believers, the great influx of the faithful, Jews and gentiles alike, are the "living stones" who comprise the edifice proper (1Cor.3:10-17; Eph.2:22; Heb.3:6; 1Pet.2:5).

All are fully and equally members of Christ's body, Christ's assembly, and God's house (1Tim.3:15; Heb.3:6), and when the last trumpet blows and our Lord returns, the entire "structure" will be united in resurrection to join Him in His triumphal return (1Cor.15:50-54; 1Thes.4:13-17; 1Jn.3:2; Rev.19:14). So Jewish hardness based upon an unwillingness to accept gentile inclusion into the fellowship of faith is clearly misguided. Equally as dangerous, however, is the wrong-headed idea that the Church is largely a gentile concern (whereas in fact true Israel and the Church are one and inseparably the same), as well as any false doctrine which fails to appreciate the importance of Israel to God and in the plan of God.

I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.
Romans 11:1 NKJV

Rather than being done with Israel, God's plans for her both as part of the Church and also in fulfilling every promise to her during the Millennium, have never changed. Israel's role in God's plan has always been fundamental. She is the one nation on the face of the earth who had a special relationship with Him (Ex.19:5-6; Mal.3:17). Israel is, in fact, the perfect standard by which God judges all others.

1) Israel is the ultimate measure: Deuteronomy 32:8 states that the boundaries of the nations were established by God "according to the number of the sons of Israel", making their number the standard in conformity to which the Lord has planned human history (cf. Deut.26:19; 28:1; Ezek.5:5; Amos 6:2).

2) Israel is the ultimate root: Following the cross, Jew and gentile are now one in Christ (Gal.3:28; Eph.2:11-22; Col.3:11), but it is the root of Israel into which gentiles are grafted, not the other way around (Rom.11:18).

²⁴ This issue is covered in detail throughout the *Satanic Rebellion* series; see especially SR 5: Judgment, Restoration, and Replacement.

3) Israel is the ultimate foundation: The prophets (including, for example, Moses, David, Elijah, and Elisha), all writers of scripture²⁵, all the apostles, all of the ultimate evangelists (viz., the 144,000 of Rev.7), and, last and most significantly, the Messiah Himself (Rom.9:5), all come from Israel (Eph.2:20; 1Pet.2:6; cf. Rev.21:14).

4) Israel is the ultimate goal: We are all looking forward to the day when we shall inhabit the New Jerusalem, the capital of eternal Israel, a place where the twelve gates will bear the names of twelve tribes of Israel and whose wall's twelve foundations will bear the names of the twelve Jewish apostles of the Lamb (Rev.21:12-14).

5) Israel is the ultimate organization (Is.14:1; Jer.51:19; Ezek.47:22-23): That a tribal reorganization within Israel will ultimately ensue is indicated by the fact that the twelve apostles (clearly not evenly distributed among the tribes: James and John are brothers as are Peter and Andrew) will judge the twelve tribes (Matt.19:28; Lk.22:28-30; cf. also Is.66:21; Heb.7:14). Given the importance of gems and stones in designating tribal division in Israel (cf. Ex.28:17-20; 39:10-13; Josh.4:2-24), the promise of the "white stone" inscribed with a "new name" in Revelation 2:17, in addition to its significance for our individual recognition and reward, is an indication of tribal assignment for all believers (cf. Is.66:21; Zech.3:9). We are all precious stones to God (Zech.9:16; 1Pet.2:5), and in His Son, the Rock, Jesus Christ (Matt.7:24-25; 16:18; Rom.9:32-33; 1Cor.10:4; 1Pet.2:4-8), we share all that Christ is, including being a part of Israel as Abraham's spiritual seed and as part of the Body of Christ (Eph.3:6; cf. Rom.2:29; 8:16-17; 8:32; 1Cor.12:2; Gal.3:29; Phil.3:3; 2Pet.1:4).

(11) So remember that you were once gentiles in the flesh, called "un-circumcised" by those of the so-called circumcision which is fleshly and man-made. (12) Remember that you were without Christ, alienated from the polity of Israel and strangers to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. (13) But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (14) For He Himself is our peace, for He has made both [Jews and gentiles] one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition, that is, the enmity between us, (15) by discharging the Law of the commandments and its requirements with His [own] body, so that He might re-create the two into one new Man by making [this] peace, (16) and might reconcile both in one Body to God through His cross, having by means of it abolished the enmity [between God and mankind]. (17) For when He had come [1st advent], He proclaimed the gospel of peace to you who were far away [from God], and peace to those who were near (Is.57:19). (18) For it is through Him that we both have our access to the Father by means of one Spirit. (19) So then, you are no longer strangers and hangers-on, but you are fellow citizens and fellow members of the household of God, (20) established upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Himself the cornerstone, (21) in whom the entire structure is in the process of being joined together and is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, (22) in whom you too are being built up into a dwelling place of

²⁵ See following footnote.

God by the Spirit.
Ephesians 2:11-22

It should not be overlooked that in the preceding passage, gentile believers of the present day are portrayed as having *become part* of the household of God along with Israel, rather than *replacing* Israel. This picture is consistent with every other passage in the New Testament where the issue is discussed. The gentiles are the wild olive branch that has been grafted into the natural olive tree of Israel (Rom.11:13-24). The truth of the matter is that the Church is composed of Jews and gentiles, and that Jewish believers are the foundation for the holy building that God is erecting – not only in the Jewish Age, but in the Church Age as well:

1) All of the apostles of Christ were Jewish. And although the New Testament is written almost exclusively in Greek, the dominant gentile language of the time, all of the writers of the Bible, New Testament as well as Old Testament, were Jewish (cf. Deut.4:6-8; Ps.147:19-20; Is.59:21; Rom.3:1-2).²⁶

2) Though many first century Jews rejected the gospel in the same way that their Judean countrymen had rejected their own Messiah, even a cursory reading of Acts and the epistles demonstrates clearly that Jewish believers were both the original foundation of the Church and continued to play a huge role after the influx of the gentiles had begun.

3) Jewish believers not only exist but have played and continue to play a critical part in all generations of the Church (Rom.11:5). For the gospel is theirs by first priority, and ours (as gentiles) by the grace of God: "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek (i.e., gentile)" (Rom.1:16; cf. Matt.10:5; 15:26; Acts 13:46; Rom.2:9-10).

4) And the Messiah comes from Israel (Jn.4:22; cf. Ps.2:8). We must never forget that Christ is Jewish, the seed of Abraham, the Vine of the vine of Israel (Ps.80:8-16; Jn.15:1ff), the Branch of

²⁶ Small parts of both Old and New Testaments are in Aramaic. As concerns authorship of the Old Testament, though some parts are anonymous, these are all in Hebrew. The only "anonymous" New Testament book is Hebrews, and that epistle was penned by the apostle Paul, who purposely omitted his name because of the rancor it would certainly have caused in Judea coming from the "apostle to the gentiles". Luke too was Jewish (as suspected by scholars from Origen to Diessmann, in Rom.16:21 he is undoubtedly the "Lucius" who is described as a Jewish "kinsman" of Paul; cf. Rom.16:7), though often deemed a gentile on the basis of Colossians 4:11 through a misunderstanding of the Greek word *paregoria* (παρηγορία: used only here in the NT), which has its usual rhetorical force and refers to the help rendered to Paul in his legal case by the aforementioned Jewish Christians: "These are my only fellow workers for the kingdom of heaven who are of the circumcision who spoke on my behalf (i.e., uttered helpful words in Paul's defense to the Roman authorities, not words of comfort to Paul – after all, with all of the Jewish Christians at Rome evident from the book of Romans, it would be beyond strange if these three were the only persons of Jewish origin who comforted Paul during his captivity)".

David's line (Is.4:2; Jer.23:5; 33:15; Zech.3:8; 6:12), and, prophetically, the Light of Israel, the Light of the world (Is.42:6; 49:6-7; 55:3-5 compared with Jn.1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46).

Therefore while it is true that gentiles are Jesus' "other sheep" (Jn.10:16; 11:52; cf. Zech.2:11), that we have been made one with Jewish believers in Christ (Gal.3:28; cf. our "brotherhood" in Matt.23:8), that the barrier between the two groups has been broken down through His cross (Eph.2:11-21), and that there will be many from the east and the west who will recline together with the Lamb at His victory banquet (Is.25:6; Matt.8:11; cf. Zech.2:11), Christians of gentile stock need to understand that we are Israel's spiritual seed (Rev.12:17), and sons of Abraham by faith (Rom.4:11; 4:16). For we are a wild olive branch, and it is the root of Israel which bears us, not the other way around:

(19) Now someone may say "Branches have been broken off for me to be grafted in." True enough. (20) They were broken off because of their unbelief, and you stand secure because of your faith. But do not think arrogant thoughts. Rather, have a care. (21) For if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you either. (22) So consider God's mercy and severity. For He is severe towards those who have fallen away, but merciful towards you – if, that is, you continue in that mercy. (23) And if they do not continue in their unbelief, they will be grafted back in. For God is able to graft them back in again.

Romans 11:17-23

(22) But you have come [not to Mount Sinai but] to *Mount Zion* and to the city of the living God, [that is, you have come to] the Heavenly *Jerusalem*, and to myriads of [elect] angels in assembly [before God], (23) and to the Church of the firstborn enrolled [as its citizens] in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of justified [believers] [who have now] completed [their tasks], (24) and to Jesus, the Mediator of a better covenant, and to sprinkled blood (i.e., the work of Christ in bearing our sins) which speaks [far] more powerfully than that of Abel[’s sacrifice].

Hebrews 12:22-24

What shall we say then to all this? Is there any advantage to being Jewish? Great advantage in every way (Rom.3:1-2)! For they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers and are heirs to all the promises of God, being also the ones first entrusted with the truth of the Word of God (Rom.11:28-29). But these advantages fall only to those who respond to the truth.

(28) For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; (29) but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

Romans 2:28-29

(7) Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. (8) And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." (9) So then those

who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.
Galatians 3:7-9 NKJV

On the one hand, gentiles have to remember that we are the wild olive, not the natural one, but on the other we must also not be deceived or otherwise drawn into legalism of any sort. We can admire and revere Israel and her storied history, we can respect the fact that all Jews, even unbelievers, are still "beloved for the sake of the fathers" (Rom.3:3), and we can and most definitely should respect and admire those believers who are of Jewish stock. But when it comes to misusing the Law (1Tim.1:8), now fulfilled by Christ and replaced by grace (Rom.6:14; 10:4), we need always to be able to say with Paul, the greatest Jewish apostle of them all, "we did not give in to them for a moment" (Gal.2:5 NIV).

f. Reassertion of Jewish Leadership prior to Christ's Return

(1) The word of the LORD came to me: (2) "Son of man, speak to your people and say to them: 'When I bring the sword against a land, and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman, (3) and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the people, (4) then if anyone hears the trumpet but does not heed the warning and the sword comes and takes their life, their blood will be on their own head. (5) Since they heard the sound of the trumpet but did not heed the warning, their blood will be on their own head. If they had heeded the warning, they would have saved themselves. (6) But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes someone's life, that person's life will be taken because of their sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for their blood.' "

Ezekiel 33:1-6 NIV

Despite the previous general "hardness", during the last phase of the Church age, when the Jewish age overlaps with it for its final seven years known as the Tribulation, Israel will once more take the lead in spectacular fashion. At that time, there will be many of Jewish descent who do listen to the "watchmen": 1) to Moses and Elijah, the two witnesses of Revelation chapter eleven, resuscitated for a warning ministry of the greatest significance, and 2) to the 144,000 Jewish evangelists (Rev.7:1-8; 14:1-5), who will be instrumental in turning the hearts of many of their countrymen back to the Lord (Matt.24:15-22; Mk.13:9-13; Lk.21:20-24; Rev.12:6; 12:13-17; cf. Lk.1:16).²⁷ Israel will thus again provide the leadership for the Church – and continue to do so until the Messiah Himself returns.

5. The Time of Transition versus the Present Status Quo

a. The Dispensation of the Spirit

²⁷ For the details, see BB 2B: Eschatology: section 4, "The Tribulation's First Half".

"I baptize you with water (i.e., physically) for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Matthew 3:11 NIV

(4) And gathering them together [Jesus] commanded [the disciples] not to depart from Jerusalem, but to await the promise of the Father (i.e., the Holy Spirit) "which you heard about from Me. (5) For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Spirit not many days from now".

Acts 1:4-5

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth".

Acts 1:8

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is what makes the Church Age unique.²⁸ In tandem with the completed Word of truth (2Cor.6:7; Eph.1:13; 2Tim.2:15; Jas.1:18), inspired and superintended by the Spirit of truth (Jn.14:17; 15:26; 16:13), the "one baptism" of the Church Age (Eph.4:5), the indwelling of the Spirit who enters us into direct union with Jesus Christ makes each of us a "new creature" (2Cor.5:17) in the "new creation" of which we are all a part (Gal.6:15). For while the Church was the Church before the cross and before the resurrection and ascension of Christ which followed, with our Lord's victory and glorification the gift of the Spirit and all His baptism of us entails has taken things to a completely different level in God's implementation of His plan of replacing the devil and his followers with the Church of Jesus Christ.²⁹ The power of the Spirit has given His Church the weapons now to wage offensive warfare as our Lord predicted (Matt.16:18; 2Cor.6:7; Eph.6:10-18). And this can be seen very clearly both in the numbers of believers streaming into the Church during this present age as well as in the expansion of our opportunities to know God's truth (by means of the completed canon of scripture and the Spirit's promulgation of said truth through various gifts and gifted believers). Nothing such as what has been happening in the Church Age ever happened before, nor could it, "for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (Jn.7:39 NKJV).

"(16) I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Comforter to be with you forever – (17) the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive, for it neither sees Him, nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He abides with you, and will be in you."

John 14:16-17

"But the Encourager, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in My Name, that One will teach you all [the truth] and will remind you of all [the truth] which I spoke to you."

²⁸ Covered in BB 5: Pneumatology, section II.B.2.b, "Baptism".

²⁹ See the *Satanic Rebellion* series, especially SR 5: Judgment, Restoration, and Replacement.

John 14:26

"But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me."

John 15:26 NKJV

"But, I tell you the truth, that I go away is profitable for you, because unless I go away the Encourager (Comforter/Counselor/Helper) will not come to you; but after I make my way [where I am going], I will send Him to you."

John 16:7

"But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come."

John 16:13 NIV

As these predictions from our Lord made clear, the coming of the Holy Spirit would fundamentally change everything. And we see the manifestation of this immediately. Whereas before the coming of the Spirit the disciples expressed doubts (Matt.28:17; Jn.20:24-29), behaved erratically (Acts 1:15-26), and generally seem little changed – even after the cross and resurrection – from the men they were before, once the Spirit comes upon them, they are transformed, and become the apostles we love and admire.

(1) When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. (2) And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. (3) Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. (4) And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (5) And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. (6) And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. (7) Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? (8) And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? (9) Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, (10) Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, (11) Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God." (12) So they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "Whatever could this mean?" (13) Others mocking said, "They are full of new wine." (14) But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. (15) For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. (16) But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

(17) 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of

My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. (18) And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall prophesy.' "

Acts 2:1-18 NKJV

Peter's stirring and courageous Pentecost speech would be impossible to explain without understanding that he has now been baptized with the Holy Spirit, and that it is the Spirit who is empowering him, using the truth he has learned (directly from our Lord) to minister to the assembled multitude (cf. Matt.10:17-20; Mk.13:9-11; Lk.12:11-12; 21:12-15). From henceforth, the gospel would be presented without rituals or shadows, the truth gleaming forth directly in the visible face of Jesus Christ (2Cor.4:3-6). Now, in keeping with our Lord's commands, instead of being largely confined to Israel and a few proselytes, the gospel would be taken far and wide to the gentiles around the world (Acts 1:8; cf. Matt.28:18-20; Lk.24:47).

This new effort would be led by a specially empowered cadre of men, newly gifted by the Spirit to guide its commencement: not the priests prescribed by Law, but the apostles of the Lamb. Instead of a centralized place of worship in Jerusalem, administered by priests and Levites, the Church would now be entirely decentralized, with assemblies, local churches, arising worldwide wherever the Word of God arrived. Instead of the coming of the Messiah being taught through the sacrifice and the rituals of the temple, the Spirit would inspire a new "testament", the perfect fulfillment of the Word of God which would make clear the true inner meaning of everything in the old, and offer the potential for a closer walk with the Lord than ever before. Instead of the community of faith consisting almost exclusively of Jewish members focused on a single nation-state, now gentiles would stream into the Church in unprecedented and amazingly large numbers "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Rev.5:9). And instead of giving our attention to the Law and keeping its strictures, the Church would now be given a new way of life "in the Spirit", informed and empowered by His gifts and by the New Testament that He would inspire.

In short, it would be difficult to underestimate the significance and the magnitude of the changes that this shift in "dispensations" from the Age of Israel to the Age of the Church entailed, occasioned by the universal baptism of the Holy Spirit of all believers (Matt.3:11; Acts 11:16; Rom.9:5; Eph.4:5), His uniting of us all directly to Jesus Christ (1Cor.12:13; Gal.3:26-28), and His gifting and empowering us through His indwelling of us (1Cor.12:4-11; Gal.5:16-26; Eph.5:18-19), and His inspiration of the completed Word of God through which He guides us (Eph.6:17; 2Pet.1:16-21; cf. 2Sam.23:2; Neh.9:30; Zech.7:12; Matt.22:43; Mk.12:36; Acts 4:25; 1Tim.4:1; Heb.3:7; 9:8; 10:15; Rev.2:7; 2:11; 2:17; 2:29; 3:6; 3:13; 3:22; 17:13; 22:17).

(9) [God] has made known to us the mystery He has willed, according to His own benevolent purpose which He determined in [Christ], (10) for administering (Gk. *oikonomia*, "**dispensation**") this [present] fulfillment of the epochs (i.e., the Church Age), so that all things may be incorporated into Christ, things in heaven, and things on earth.

Ephesians 1:9-10

As this passage teaches us, the Church Age is strategic. It completes the Plan of God for forming an assembly to replace what was lost in the devil's revolt by filling up the Body of Christ, thus bringing together in victory "things in heaven and on earth": the Church as the new complement, replacing the fallen angels who rebelled. Bringing to fruition this exploitation of Christ's great victory on the cross, however, required a massive alteration in the way God dispensed His truth. It required the gift of the Spirit and all the corresponding changes that wondrous outpouring entailed (as briefly considered above with further details discussed below, the provision of the New Testament being fundamental). Because of this, it would be unreasonable, not to mention unworkable, to expect the small number of believers who remained loyal to our Lord on that first Pentecost of the Church Age either to instantly understand all of these things which had been "mysteries" to them up until that point, or to be able on their own and immediately to begin functioning as the Church was meant to function during her unique Age once the Age of Israel had come to a close.³⁰ In other words, a time of transition – with special God-given features to aid that transition – was absolutely necessary.

(2) By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, (3) and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

1st John 4:2-3 NKJV

Christ "come in the flesh" and having suffered spiritual death on the cross to redeem us from all of our sins was a mystery only fully understood once completed – and even then it took the ministry of the Spirit over many years to bring home the full import of what the first advent and the cross meant (these things being only fully revealed in the completed New Testament). The differences on the one hand between animal sacrifice to teach by shadow and analogy the suffering of the coming Messiah, and the actual cross of the Son of God are so great (not to mention all the other elements of the Law that would be inappropriate for the entire gentile world after the shadows of the Law had been fulfilled), that it is no wonder that there had to be this period of changeover between the Age of Israel and the Age of the Church. This transition is plainly evident throughout the book of Acts in particular. For example, we may recall that the elders in Jerusalem had to formally decide to release the gentile believers from following the Law (Acts 15:23-31), and in so doing they not only liberated them from the necessity of circumcision but from almost everything else in the Pentateuch as well.

"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

³⁰ The Age of Israel, of course, does still have seven years remaining, Daniel's seventieth week (Dan.9:24-27); these last seven years will run simultaneously with the last seven years of the Church Age, the Tribulation. See SR 5, section II.8.c, "The Jewish Ceremonial Calendar".

This adjustment regarding the Law was good and right to make, but it must be remembered that it was only granted by way of concession to resolve a conflict, and given to gentile believers only. As we have seen in detail above, the wall of partition between Jews and gentiles in the Church was broken down by the cross of Jesus Christ (Eph.2:11-22). In terms of spiritual realities, therefore, it would have been proper for all believers, Jews as well as gentiles, to discontinue following the Law – and especially the temple rites – immediately, or at least as soon as the Spirit came upon them at that first Pentecost. But we cannot expect believers who had followed the Lord one way, based upon the Law which had been in place for some fourteen centuries, to pivot to the new dispensation of the Spirit with such alacrity. This change would reasonably take some time to institute, especially inasmuch as even the leadership of the Church was not immediately endowed with a complete understanding of these important doctrines when the Spirit fell upon them. His ministry would be absolutely essential to managing the transition, but the men who would eventually produce the New Testament under His inspiration and shepherd the Church into her new age had to learn the truth the same way we all do, namely, by hearing it and by believing it, and the great differences between the Age of Israel and the Age of the Church meant that this learning curve would be steep indeed – and hence would not happen overnight.

b. The Need for a Transition

Given how many gentile believers in our own day are reluctant to depart from the traditions of and association with various beloved denominations (even when it becomes clear to them that these are doctrinally deficient), we can hardly fault Jewish believers of the first century for being willing initially reluctant to abandon the God-given Law in which they and their fathers had been trained and reared for many centuries. To get to the point where local churches would replace synagogues, where the completed Bible would replace the temple and its rites, and where the individual believer's walk in the Spirit according to the truth would replace keeping the Law would take time. Time would also be needed to lead enough gentiles to salvation around the Mediterranean world for there to be a sufficient number of believers to establish a critical mass of local churches strong enough to resist the influence and pull of the long established Jewish communities with allegiance to Jerusalem. Time would be needed to produce a completed Bible through the inspiration of the New Testament and to distribute it to the newly established local churches. And time would be needed to train a cadre of prepared men to teach the new way of the Spirit and the now revealed mysteries of Christ and His Church to these same churches and to do so in sufficient depth for the believers therein to grow to spiritual maturity and beyond.

The Lord's "key personnel" for accomplishing this challenging transition from the rule of the Law to the rule of grace were the twelve apostles – the original eleven plus the apostle Paul – a small number of men compared to the monumental task at hand. The apostles, after all, could not be everywhere at once. Even more problematic, however, was the fact that none of them was immediately ready to take on this difficult job. It would be some years before Peter, the leader of the eleven, was ready to hear the message from the Spirit directing him to take the gospel to

anyone outside of Israel, and the great apostle to the gentiles, the apostle Paul, was not even a believer when the Spirit's advent began the Church Age. Moreover, all twelve of these men were Jewish and, despite their three and a half years with the Lord (on the part of the eleven), had grown up in Judaism and were not of sufficient imagination to envision things in the Church as dramatically different from the way they had always been under Israel's direct leadership.

To be fair, even if there had been some miraculous transformation of the apostles' thinking so as to immediately receive and assimilate what the fulfilment of the mystery of Christ, the cross, the resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit meant and would mean, one could hardly expect their Jewish countrymen to make an equally instantaneous shift from the temple worship and following the Law to what the Church would soon become. As a result, the transition described in the book of Acts (and evident elsewhere at places in the New Testament epistles), would first have to be an internal one in the hearts of the leadership as much as in the forms and structure of the new congregations (of gentiles along with Jews who would eventually come to faith in Christ). Only a few short days before Pentecost, these same apostles had not understood about the necessity for Christ's spiritual death nor what the resurrection meant and entailed – and the greatest of them was not yet even saved.

(9) And they sang a new song, saying, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain and have purchased with your blood for our God [men] from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, (10) and have made them into a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will rule upon the earth!"

Revelation 5:9-10

This change – from a single nation, Israel, as God's light to the world, to a worldwide community of faith – would be tremendous. It would not and could not be accomplished overnight, nor would it have ever come to pass without special and unique assistance from God Himself – so great were the adjustments necessary to transform the Church from her pre-cross status to her post-Pentecost glory.

1) The magnitude of the change. It would probably be easier to list the things which did not change when comparing the Age of Israel to the Church Age after the new dispensation was fully up and running. For while many denominations (many "Christian" in name only) and pseudo-Christian organizations have dressed themselves up with the accouterment of Israel and the Law, in terms of outward forms and inward power, a local church functioning in the Spirit, composed of genuine born-from-above / born-again believers who are walking in the Spirit according to the Word of God, has very little indeed in common with what we find in the Old Testament. We have no priests or Levites today – every believer is a priest with direct access to the Father and to our Lord Jesus Christ (Jn.14:13-14; Eph.2:18; 3:12; Heb.4:16). We are no longer under the strictures of the Mosaic Law today – we are now walking according to the law of love, the law of the Spirit (Rom.8:2; 13:10; Gal.5:14), and we are under the authority of grace, not the Law (Rom.6:14), having died to it (Rom.7:14; Gal.2:19), since it has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Rom.10:4). We no longer learn from rituals performed by a hereditary select few – today there is no longer a temple and every believer has been given the Holy Spirit (Rom.8:9; 1Cor.6:19; cf.

1Cor.3:16), as well as gifts which are important in every case for the welfare and edification of the Body of Christ as a whole (1Cor.12:7). We no longer assemble at one geographical place at set times to worship in a symbolic way – today we worship the resurrected Messiah Himself, gathering to learn about Him and His truth wherever the will of God has made that possible for us anywhere around the globe (Matt.18:20). We who are gentiles are no longer kept at arm's length in rituals of worship – today we are united without distinction to all of our Jewish brothers and sisters who love the Lord (Col.3:11; Gal.3:28). And we are no longer restricted to the Old Testament which saw the coming Christ "through a mirror darkly" – today we have the entirety of the Word of God wherein Jesus Christ is clearly and fully revealed (1Cor.13:9-12). None of this was more than dimly anticipated before that first Pentecost of the Church, and even then the gravity of these changes and the specifics they entailed would have to be appreciated and implemented over time.

2) The objective. The point of all of these massive changes between the dispensation of the Age of Israel and that of the Church Age was the establishment of a worldwide assembly of both gentiles and Jews (Jn.10:16), namely, the filling up of the Body of Jesus Christ (Eph.1:9-10). For this to be accomplished, rather than a centralized system of dispensation based on a single, chosen nation with a single racial identity, a decentralized system of dispensing the truth would be needed, one not tied to any place or nation or race (Rev.5:9-10).

(25) Husbands, love your wives as also Christ loved His Church and gave Himself over [to death] on her behalf, (26) so that He might sanctify her, having purified her by the washing of the water [of truth] in [His] Word. (27), so that He might Himself [and] for Himself present His Church in glory, without spot or blemish, but so that she might [instead] be holy and without blame.

Ephesians 5:25-27

"Let us rejoice and be jubilant, and let us give glory to Him, because the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His Bride (lit., "wife"; cf. Rev.21:9) has prepared herself."

Revelation 19:7

3) The problem of Jews versus gentiles. The progression prophesied by our Lord at Acts 1:8 – "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (NIV) – was not just geographical. The actual expansion of the Church did indeed progress in keeping with the literal prophecy in terms of geography, but it is also important to note that there is an ethnic progression as well. Jerusalem and Judea represent "Jews only" (relatively nearer and farther from the Lord respectively) as the first expansion of the Church on a foundation of Jewish born-again / born-from-above believers who accepted Jesus Christ as the Messiah; Samaria represents all those who formed a "middle ground" of neither Jew nor gentile in the way contemporary Jews felt about such matters, whose inclusion into the Church, while remarkable, would not be completely unprecedented or unexpected; "the ends of the earth", however, clearly represent the gentiles around the world, peoples with no historical connection to Israel, peoples who were, in terms both of Jewish thought and historical practice, "the enemy", and hardly likely-seeming candidates for the expansion of the family of God.

Traditionalist thinking along those lines was widespread – even among the apostles (cf. Acts 10:14-15; 11:1-3; Gal.2:11-16). For the Church Age to accomplish what the Lord intended, not only would Jewish believers from the apostles down need to gradually divorce themselves from sentimental attachment to the Law and the temple and all the ways of the past, but also from the prejudice of viewing gentiles as inveterate unbelievers by birth, or second class believers at best who needed to adopt Jewish ways to be saved. This part of the learning curve sometimes proved very steep indeed – and bumpy too. But as with the prophecies of the Messiah (e.g., Is.53:1ff.), God had witnessed to what was coming (Jer.31:31-34).

- (1) "Behold! My Servant whom I uphold,
My Elect One in whom My soul delights!
I have put My Spirit upon Him;
He will bring forth justice *to the Gentiles*.
 - (2) He will not cry out, nor raise His voice,
Nor cause His voice to be heard in the street.
 - (3) A bruised reed He will not break,
And smoking flax He will not quench;
He will bring forth justice for truth.
 - (4) He will not fail nor be discouraged,
Till He has established justice in the earth;
And the coastlands shall wait for His law."
 - (5) Thus says God the LORD, Who created the heavens and stretched them out,
Who spread forth the earth and that which comes from it,
Who gives breath to the people on it,
And spirit to those who walk on it:
 - (6) "I, the LORD, have called You in righteousness,
And will hold Your hand;
I will keep You and give You as *a covenant to the people*,
As *a light to the Gentiles*,
 - (7) To open blind eyes,
To bring out prisoners from the prison,
Those who sit in darkness from the prison house.
 - (8) I am the LORD, that is My name;
And My glory I will not give to another,
Nor My praise to carved images.
 - (9) Behold, the former things have come to pass,
And *new things* I declare;
Before they spring forth I tell you of them."
- Isaiah 42:1-9 NIV

4) The problem of gentiles versus the Law. If it had been required that gentiles keep the Law, we can say with assuredness that the massive influx of gentiles into the Church would never have taken place. But this had indeed been the approach in the past, prior to the coming of the Lord, and up until His Church Age began, proselytes from the gentiles had amounted to not much more

than a trickle into the family of God. The practical difficulties of those not brought up in the Jewish culture suddenly adopting the Law were immense, with the result that few up until this point had tried to do so (and it is a matter of debate as to just how effectively such individuals actually "kept the Law"). As it was and is, the plan of God called for no such yoke being laid on the necks of the new gentile believers (cf. Matt.11:30), but old habits die hard, and we see in the book of Acts and elsewhere in the New Testament that attempts by traditionalists to thwart the Spirit in this regard were responsible for major disruptions in the expanding Church, and had to be dealt with in summary fashion (e.g., Acts 15:1-29; Gal.5:1-13; Col.2:16-17).

5) The Great Commission (Matt.28:18-20).

(17) And when they saw Him, they worshiped [Him], but some [of them still] had doubts.
(18) Then Jesus came over and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, (19) so go and make all nations my followers by baptizing them into the Person (lit., "Name") of the Father and [into the Person] of the Son and [into the Person] of the Holy Spirit, (20) [and] by teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you all the days until the end of the age."
Matthew 28:17-20

In this important passage, it should not be overlooked that our Lord's command to evangelize "the nations" through the truth (v.20) and Spirit baptism (v.19) is preceded by His announcement that "all authority" has now been vested in Himself. The Church Age, it should never be forgotten, is special because of Jesus Christ and the overt role He has taken on by virtue of His victory on the cross of being the now *visible* object of our faith. The Old Testament regime of dispensation through shadows has been replaced by a new regime wherein the truth is directly taught – and facilitated in both its teaching and its reception by the gift of the Spirit, the firstfruits of the "spoils" we receive by virtue of sharing in His victory.

While the truth about Jesus Christ contained in the Law and the Prophets was veiled and anticipatory, He has now been fully revealed through His incarnation and subsequent glorification as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Jesus Christ – the revelation of His person (God and man) and His work of redemption – is the reason for the needed transition from the Age of Israel to the Age of the Church; and we must never lose sight of the fact that glorifying *Him* through fulfilling the Bride for whom He died is the ultimate purpose behind the dramatic change of dispensation.

6) The importance of the Spirit in the process of transition. The Peter of Acts chapter two is remarkably different from the Peter of Acts chapter one – and of the gospels. It is impossible to read his speech therein and not be aware that he would never have had the confidence or the inspiration to deliver such words without the coming of the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt.10:19-20; Mk.13:11; Lk.12:11-12; Acts 4:13). The presence and power of the Spirit is there to be seen throughout the book of Acts in particular, and it is obvious at many points that what happened could never and would never have happened without His special intervention, from His empowering of the tongues on Pentecost which brings the great crowd together to hear Peter's

inspired speech, to His direction of Philip to witness to the Ethiopian and His miraculous transporting of him elsewhere thereafter (Acts 8:26-40), to the threefold vision that led to Peter's witnessing to Cornelius and his family (Acts 10:9-20), to the special call for Paul and Barnabas to be commissioned as missionaries (Acts 13:2-3) – and many more things beside (as we shall see below). The Spirit's provision of special gifts, special signs, special miracles and, not at all least, the inspiration and distribution of the New Testament, were all unique developments, most of which had never happened before in this way and to this degree, nor ever would again. And without this specialized ministry to the believers of this time, the transition to the Church Age dispensation of the truth centered on the local church would not have been possible.

7) The gift of apostleship. While every believer is a part of the Body of Christ and has an important role to play in the plan of God for the edification of Christ's Church, the apostles' role was special. These twelve (the eleven plus Paul: cf. Acts 9:15) were the key leaders in charge of managing the transition of dispensations we are studying. While the Spirit took the lead on the divine side, these men were responsible for providing the human leadership necessary to bridge the gap between the Age of Israel and the Age of the Church. This gift, it should be noted, was never given before and has never been given since – and should be distinguished from other mentions of "apostles" in the New Testament where we have instances of missionaries who are dedicated primarily to evangelism abroad (the word means "one sent"), but who were not entrusted with any authoritative oversight of the Church as a whole ("apostles" with a small "a", that is, as opposed to the twelve Apostles of the Lamb: cf. Rev.21:14 where there are twelve and only twelve; cf. 1Pet.1:1; 2Pet.1:1; Rom.1:1, 1Cor.1:1). The twelve were appointed by Jesus Christ Himself (cf. Jn.15:16; Tit.1:1), and their power and authority was unprecedented.

The scope of apostolic duties and responsibilities can easily be seen from Acts and the epistles. The apostles mediated the baptism of the Holy Spirit in the days before it became automatic at salvation (e.g., Acts 8:14-17; Rom.8:9); they were given to perform many extraordinary miracles as a demonstration of their authority (2Cor.12:12; cf. Acts 5:15-16; 19:11-12; Heb.2:3-4); they had authority to organize (e.g., Acts 14:23; Tit.1:5; cf. Rom.11:13; Gal.2:7), direct and discipline the new local churches which their evangelism and that of those associated with them produced (e.g., 1Cor.16:2; 3Jn.1:9-12); and, very importantly, to them (and those associated with them) was given the task of producing the New Testament under the Holy Spirit's inspiration (e.g., 2Pet.1:16-21; Rev.1:19).

(19) So then, you are no longer strangers and hangers-on, but you are fellow citizens and fellow members of the household of God, (20) established upon *the foundation of the apostles* and prophets, with Christ Himself the cornerstone.

Ephesians 2:19-20

8) Other special gifts. As we have seen earlier in this series³¹, the Spirit also provided a number of special, temporary gifts in order to assist the process of transition. Most of these gifts revolved

³¹ BB 5: Pneumatology, section II.B.3.d.1.c, "Temporary Gifts".

around the need to provide for the spiritual edification of new believers in the growing number of new local churches where there had not yet been time to train up a cadre of prepared pastor-teachers – and in the absence initially of the New Testament which would teach these truths to one and all. Therefore tongues (the main focus of which was evangelism), interpretation of tongues (so that the former gift might be used for teaching), prophecy, wisdom, knowledge and faith (these last three giving the gifted a special ability to provide the named spiritual commodity) helped to bridge that gap until such time as more men had had the time to prepare themselves adequately to lead a congregation to spiritual maturity through the teaching of the Word of God, and until the New Testament had been completed and widely distributed.

9) End of the transition. We will consider this point in greater detail below. Suffice it to say here that just as most contemporary Jewish believers did not immediately understand this shift of dispensations or its significance, analogously many Christians today do not understand the significance of the end of the time of transition we are studying. Once the canon was completed and a network of local churches had been established with a sufficient number of prepared pastor-teachers leading them, there was no longer any need of the apostles – or of the other special gifts and miraculous interventions of the Spirit which were so essential to managing this transition from the Age of Israel to the Age of the Church. Indeed, failing to understand and appreciate this basic point has been behind innumerable abuses and doctrinal errors throughout the Church Age.

c. The Nature of the Book of Acts

In the history of the Church, probably more Christians have led themselves and others astray by misinterpreting the book of Acts than any other portion of scripture. The book of Acts is a historical treatment of what actually happened during the time of transition from the Age of Israel to the Age of the Church. As such, there are many things therein which, while they did happen, do not allow us to conclude that such things will always happen that way – or should.

When our Lord is speaking, we may be sure that everything He says is true and useful "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2Tim.3:16). And we know that everything He did was right. When David (or any other prophet) is speaking in his capacity as a prophet (e.g., in any of the Psalms), we know that all He says is proscriptive. But we are not allowed to conclude that David's actions as recorded in the books of Samuel are necessarily right. They may be right, they may be wrong (as the most egregious of his failures in his conduct towards Uriah and Bathsheba make very clear), or they may be of no particular probative or exemplary value at all. Proper interpretation is required to reach the truth whenever the Bible is describing what people did or said in a historical situation.

This same principle applies with the book of Acts. The apostles were specially gifted men (as David was), but that does not mean that everything they did was correct or meant to be precisely emulated (any more than in the case of David). Their actions may have been wrong (there are some examples of this) or they may have no *specific* probative or exemplary value for us – even

when they are laudatory. That is because the period covered by the book of Acts represents a transitional era between Age of Israel and the Law and the Age of the Church with her completed New Testament. As a result, many things that happened during this era (such as many miraculous occurrences and the functioning of special gifts to aid the transition) are not meant to be repeated even if they actually did happen and were correct to do at the time. Thus, though we can learn much from and be inspired by the experiences recorded in the book of Acts, there are at least as many examples therein of actions and events from which we must not draw universal principles and apply them to the Church today (e.g., the Spirit is *not* going to miraculously transport us from one place to another as He did for Philip, and it would be wrong to expect it or ask for it – and we should definitely beware of anyone claiming it).

Clearly, it was not possible and no one could expect the largely Jewish community of believers of the time to make the transition immediately and easily, from the dispensation of a Law and temple-focused nation as God's light to the world, to His evangelizing of the gentiles by means of a worldwide community of faith drawn from all races operating through the Holy Spirit with a new part of the Bible which superseded the Law. As even a cursory reading of the book of Acts reveals, this was a hard thing for many to understand, and even the apostles had a steep learning curve to climb in this regard (as for example Peter having to be prompted three times by the Spirit in Acts chapter ten before being willing to consider ministering to gentiles).

Much else was lacking, moreover, that made such an immediate switch without a period of transition impractical. On that day of the first Pentecost, not a single verse of the New Testament, the critical part of the Bible which would explain the revelation of the mystery of Jesus Christ and His Church, had yet been written. At that point, there existed not a single group or church outside of this handful of believers in Jerusalem which accepted Jesus Christ as the Messiah (Acts 1:15). And even this small band of believers who assembled together on that first Pentecost still only dimly understood the depth of doctrine and necessary teaching about Jesus Christ taught directly by the Master Himself, not to mention all that the Spirit was about to reveal in the New Testament. Simply put, when the Church Age began, no one anywhere in the world at that point was capable of teaching and dispensing all of the fundamental truths our Lord had proclaimed, let alone all of the other blessed inspired doctrines the New Testament would eventually comprise. So while the apostles had received their mandate to spread the gospel worldwide – which comprises everything about Jesus Christ, His Person and His sacrificial victory on the cross along with all the rest of God's truth meant to be learned and believed by His people – neither they nor their few associates were so far in any position to do so. There were as yet no missionaries, and no one to send them forth.

There would have to be a *geographical* progression, yes, "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8; cf. Lk.24:47); but even more critically there would have to be progression of *revelation* to support it, an unveiling of all the deeper truths about our Lord Jesus Christ and the new Church Age soon to be contained in the completed New Testament. Just as none of us learns everything the Bible teaches in a few days after becoming believers (in fact, of course, the learning never ends – or at least it should not), so also the

apostles and their trusted associates would likewise need to hear these truths from the Spirit, believe them, fully digest them, and begin to put them into practice in a somewhat gradual way. Since they were now the leaders of the Church, that meant quite simply that other believers, whether already so or soon to respond to the evangelism of the Spirit, would not be able progress faster than those teaching them by spoken or written words (Matt.10:24-25; Lk.6:40).

For the necessary critical mass of the community of faith to arise would require the Spirit moving mountains – which the Spirit certainly did. But it did take time, time for the apostles to learn, for the books of the New Testament to be written, for the message to be spread throughout the Roman world of that time – whence it would be disseminated worldwide. Peter's speech on that first Pentecost does reveal the extent to which the Spirit helped him put together truths which he had heard but up until that very point had not yet fully appreciated. But as we see even here (e.g., in his allowance of water-baptism, a Jewish ritual anticipating the coming of the Messiah; see below), and throughout Acts, he and all the others who had grown up under Judaism would have to make adjustments to their way of thinking and to their behavior as well, so as to learn all of the other doctrinal truths which union with Christ through the Spirit entailed. What that means for us today is that special care has to be taken not to deduce methods of faith and practice from actions which reflect this process of growth in the book of Acts.

As mentioned above, in common with all historical books of the Bible, the book of Acts records what actually happened and what was actually said, rather than telling us in every case whether or not we should follow suit today. For that reason, we have to use some judgment to discern whether or not what someone says or does in Acts is what we should say or do today. If our Lord said it, well and good: He was given the Spirit "without measure" so that His every word was always the truth (Jn.3:34). If Acts were an epistle, well and good: the apostles who wrote these inspired books "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2Pet.1:21 NIV; cf. 2Pet.3:15-16). But Acts is a chronicle: it describes for us what people (believers and others) actually did and what they actually said in a historical setting – a special time of transition – and we must thus use some spiritual common sense to determine whether their words and deeds in individual cases are to be repeated by us today.

Christ chose all of the twelve apostles (the eleven plus Paul: cf. Acts 9:15), so that the "election" of Matthias, and "by lot" at that, was clearly misguided (for example, believers of the Church Age are never instructed to use a lottery). And we know that the believers who were "of the sect of the Pharisees" were still of the opinion that circumcision was necessary for salvation, even as late as Acts chapter 15, and that they expressed this opinion in open counsel in the presence of Peter and James . . . and Paul as well (Acts 15:5). This was clearly a mistaken point of view (as the entire book of Galatians makes clear). And having "all things in common" as the Jerusalem believers did for a short season under very special and demanding circumstances is certainly not to be recommended as standard practice for Christians today – even as it was not the case thereafter even in the book of Acts (Acts 2:44-45).

The apostles were great believers, but they were human beings. When we are told that Paul and

Barnabas got into a fight over Mark (Acts 15:2), who was right and who was wrong? After all, even Paul occasionally made mistakes (as in persisting in going up to Jerusalem despite the Spirit's warnings: Acts 20:23; 21:10); and later he did in fact come to esteem Mark (2Tim.4:11). Paul circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3) but later inveighs against that practice (Gal.5:2-4). And Peter would never have gone to Cornelius and entered his home and delivered the gospel message there unless the Spirit had commanded him and unless the Lord had given Him a thrice-repeated vision teaching him that gentiles could be saved too – so, obviously, even by the point of Acts 10, Peter still had some things to learn (compare also Gal.2:11-14).

All this is certainly not to diminish these outstanding believers – all of whom will have their names inscribed forever on one of the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem. It does, however, demonstrate that the way many people interpret the book of Acts is fundamentally flawed. Not only that, but Acts is, most of all, a book depicting the *transition* from the Age of Israel to the Age of the Church, a time when special things happened – because they had to – but will never happen again – because they are no longer necessary. It is a little more than sadly ironic, therefore, that the book designed to illustrate the transition between the Ages of Israel and the Church has been so often used for the opposite purpose, that is, to suggest that transitional practices should be engaged in today.

(4) There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;
(5) One Lord, one faith, *one baptism*, (6) One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Ephesians 4:4-6 KJV

The practice of water-baptism will serve as an illustration of this principle. In the passage above, just as there is only one Church, the body of Christ, one Holy Spirit, one Lord Jesus Christ, one faith in Him that brings salvation, and one God the Father, so there is only one baptism for the Church Age: the baptism of the Holy Spirit which began it. The only *water*-baptism in the New Testament is John's – a ritual given to bring Israel, God's people (who were supposed to be believers) to repentance in preparation for the coming of their Messiah (cf. Lk.1:17).

"I baptize you with *water* (i.e., physically) for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. *He* will baptize you with *the Holy Spirit* and with fire."

Matthew 3:11 NIV (cf. Acts 1:4-5; 1:8)

Nonetheless, many groups throughout the history of the church-visible have continued to employ the practice – although in a wide variety of forms, with a wide variety of accompanying rituals, and with no consensus on the rite's meaning. It is fair to say on the one hand that this practice and the lack of agreement about it have proven to be most divisive, and on the other that the justification for engaging in it in the first place and guidance for how it should be conducted has

come largely from passages in the book of Acts (never meant for that purpose).³²

Acts 2:38 is a good example of this. Nothing Peter does or says is "wrong" when he directs the Jerusalem crowd to be water-baptized, but it would be a mistake to assume that this is the model we are to use today. Peter does what he does and says what he says so that the assembled Jewish crowd will believe in Jesus and "receive the gift of *the Holy Spirit*" as he says. That is the important thing to notice. Unfortunately, to the extent that we may find his phrasing a bit confusing in an English translation, while Peter had the excuse of being less than 24 hours into the Church Age when he made this speech (and while it was probably for the best that these Jewish listeners who were of the generation of John the baptist and our Lord's earthly ministry were not to be immediately disabused of water-baptism – everything cannot be explained to a new or an "about to be" believer at once), the many who have followed over very many centuries after the fact have no excuse for choosing to focus on the *water* to the neglect of *the Spirit* in this passage – whose transmission to those who believed through the laying on of the apostles hands was the true point of the exercise as Peter himself tells us here.³³

³² It should be noted that at Matthew 28:19-20, our Lord does *not* mention water, and is in fact speaking of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is mentioned there not as a formula; the Greek says "baptize *into*", and thus refers to the actual union with God all Christians experience through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The disciples who are commanded to effect this baptism did so in the early days through the laying on of hands (e.g., Acts 8:17); later, this would be accomplished by the Spirit without their physical mediation whenever the gospel was proclaimed and accepted (cf. Acts 10:44-46).

³³ Given that we now have the entire Bible, there really is no longer any justification for failing to finally come to the truth. If it were not for the power of tradition, most people would probably come to the same correct conclusion – namely, that Peter's purpose here is the mediation of the Holy Spirit, and that the water has *nothing* to do with forgiveness – merely by giving close attention to what the scriptures actually say: even at Acts 2:38 the words "for the forgiveness of sin" follows immediately upon "in the Name of Jesus Christ", leaving no real doubt even here that it is faith in His Name that provides salvation, not engaging in the Jewish ritual of John's water-baptism meant to prepare for the Messiah's coming (compare what Peter says a little later in the book: Acts 10:43 NIV: "everyone *who believes in Him* receives forgiveness of sins through his name"; cf. Acts 5:31). On this one occasion on the day of Pentecost, for those who were of this Jewish generation, who knew very well that John was the Messiah's herald, being willing to undergo John's water-baptism – but "in the Name of Jesus Christ" – was no doubt a tangible demonstration of the faith that those who did so actually had. But it was through their *faith* that they were saved, by grace; not by any works such as being water-baptized (and to the extent that any believed there was such a necessary connection, to that extent what they did would not have been of faith); and it was the reception of the Holy Spirit – along with those who had just received the Spirit in the upper room – that Peter desires to effect thereby. Since this all occurred before the Spirit came to be universally given to all at the point of faith (Acts 10:35; Rom.9:25) – precisely so as to build up the authority of the apostles (in the

Then Peter said to them, "Repent [of your unbelief]". He said also, "Let each of you be baptized in the Name of Jesus as a demonstration of the forgiveness of your sins [which comes as a result of this faith], [so that] then [as a result of your faith] *you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit* (i.e., through that laying on of hands in the baptism [unique to early apostolic days; cf. Rom.8:9])."

Acts 2:38

With this interpretation, consistent in the context, the entire Bible agrees. For scripture is very clear on the purpose of water-baptism: water-baptism was John's baptism and meant to reveal the Messiah to Israel.

"I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

John 1:31 NIV

Christ's baptism, the Christian baptism, is the baptism of the Spirit (cf. Eph.4:5), as our Lord tells us:

"For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

Acts 1:5 NIV

To the extent that water-baptism is practiced in the book of Acts, despite impressions one may have from a cursory reading, it is done *only* very early on in the apostolic era (the last recorded incidence is during Paul's first journey to Greece before any of his epistles were written: Acts 18:8); and it is meant for transitional purposes only, and specifically to connect Jesus Christ to the famous ministry of His herald, John, so as to establish for Jews of that generation that Jesus was in fact the Messiah. Even at Corinth, the place of the last recorded legitimate water-baptism, there was a mixed congregation consisting of both gentiles and Jews (the Jewish synagogue was the first place evangelized: Acts 18:4ff.). Later, of course, Paul regrets engaging the practice even there:

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

1st Corinthians 1:17 NIV

But that generation of Jews – those who knew well of John but were not at first disposed to accept the Messiahship of Jesus Christ – has long since passed into history. And so should have

same way other miracles were meant to do), engaging in water-baptism (a practice with which these contemporaries were familiar) so as to lay hands upon the individuals who had believed that they might receive the Spirit (an event of which they had no experience) made a good deal of practical sense at *that* time.

the water-baptism of John, only occasionally and early on utilized by the apostles as a transitional device for the sake of those individuals who had lived before and after the cross.

(1) While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul traversed the upper regions (of Asia) and came to Ephesus. He found certain "disciples" there, (2) and he asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit *when you believed?*" They replied, "We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit". (3) So he asked them, "*Into* what were you baptized?" And they responded, "Into John's baptism". (4) And Paul said, "John baptized a baptism of *repentance* for the people, speaking in regard to Him who was about to come *after* [John] so that they would believe, that is [believe] in Jesus [when they heard the gospel]." (5) When they heard [Paul's explanation of the gospel in Acts 19:4] they were [immediately] baptized [by the Spirit] into the Person of the Lord Jesus, (6) for when Paul placed his hands upon them [to mediate the Spirit], *the Holy Spirit* came upon them and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.

Acts 19:1-6

Coming from a Jewish background, it took even the apostle Peter, who would one day have his own powerful ministry to the gentiles, some time to grasp the differences in approach the Spirit was demanding. In Acts chapter ten, as mentioned above, Peter has to be shown a dramatic vision three times and told specifically by the Holy Spirit to go and minister to Cornelius and his gentile friends before being willing to do so – and Peter himself explains that without this graphic lesson and command he would never have done so:

"That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for."

Acts 10:29 NASB

And even so, Peter would on occasion lapse back into old habits (Gal.2:11-14). For example, Peter and the other ten were certainly wrong to cast lots to replace Judas (Acts 1:15-26) – Paul is clearly the twelfth apostle whose name will be on one of the gates of New Jerusalem, not Matthias – and it would also be wrong for a local church today to throw dice to appoint "apostles". That is what happened at the time; the fact that the Spirit recorded what happened does not mean He wants us to use it as a model. That test, namely, of whether something said or done in Acts is to be taken as proscriptive (a model for us) or merely descriptive (what happened is correctly described but not meant as a model for us) has to be at the heart of any correct interpretation of the book of Acts.

One of the critical things to take into account in Acts are the circumstances. Peter addressing a crowd of Jews who are not believers, who knew about John, the Messiah's herald, and his water-baptism for repentance to prepare for His coming, who knew about and even saw Christ but still had not responded to Him in faith, on the day of witnessing a marvelous miracle never repeated before or since Pentecost, when the temple was still standing and before anyone, even the apostles, really yet understood the mystery that the new era of the Church would see the gospel given far and wide to the gentiles, and that ritualistic Judaism would soon come to an end (when the temple was destroyed), constitutes a different set of circumstances entirely than, say, a pastor

today standing in the pulpit of a local church today.

Proper interpretation has to examine what the Bible has to say about *all* aspects of the doctrinal question at issue in such cases; that is to say, in the case of *any* historical action being described, it is inappropriate to apply the mere fact of said action as pre- or proscriptive for all time automatically. Failing to take into account, for example, the circumstances of Peter's speech in Acts chapter two guarantees misunderstanding and misapplying his words in regard to how things stand today. So drawing the conclusion that water-baptism is good (or necessary) for the Church today based on Peter's words at Acts 2:38 misunderstands that we are not unbelieving Jews who saw and rejected Christ, standing in the shadow of the temple and having also not responded to or engaged in John's water-baptism (as they were supposed to have done), a ritual which foreshadowed the coming Messiah and prepared the way for Him.

The brief continuation of John's water-baptism – while not appropriate today – did have value for a short time for Jews of that day who had seen John and Jesus and had so far rejected them, allowing these individuals to "catch up" so to speak with their believing Jewish peers in responding to the Messiah, albeit late. The true, original symbolism of John's water-baptism was a "baptism of repentance" which looked forward to a Messiah about to come to Israel, a nation supposed to consist completely of believers; employing it from now on for gentiles for whom all of this was brand new, now that the Messiah had already come and died for our sins would, would be misleading in the extreme (since there is no correspondence of circumstance or symbolism, rightly understood).

As with faulty conclusions about water-baptism based upon misunderstanding the purpose of the book of Acts, such is the case with many other issues as well, when, instead of seeing the book for what it is – a description of the period of transition given to us precisely so as to avoid such errors – "doctrine" is erroneously formed from extrapolating matters of faith and practice from descriptions of historical actions, many of which were merely reflective of that special time and not meant to be repeated.

In order to demonstrate this principle as well as to provide a palliative against misusing passages in Acts as the basis for false practices in the local church (our subject in section II of this study), it will be helpful here to examine briefly the book of Acts on a chapter by chapter basis (though neither exhaustively nor comprehensively since time and space do not allow it). In so doing, it will be seen that the entire book is replete with distinctive, "one time" events and impermanent, temporary practices which were unique to this special time of transition between the Ages of Israel and the Church, and that the men who were appointed to direct this transition, rather than being miraculously provided with an understanding of the changes in the process of taking place, had very much to learn about them in a progressive way, "on the job", so to speak. On reflection, that is far from surprising, inasmuch as they were human just as we are, and all of us believers today likewise have to learn the truth one principle at a time.

d. Acts Chapter by Chapter

Acts 1 - In spite of our Lord's prophecy of the Spirit, Peter and company show an amazing lack of patience in their determination to "elect" a new apostle. This was very clearly a mistake (as the use of a lottery – since even in Old Testament times only priests using the Urim and Thummim of the ephod were authorized to put "yes and no" questions to the Lord – makes clear). Nothing is ever heard of Matthias again, but our Lord chose Paul (Acts 9:15), and Paul affirms his apostleship in every epistle (2Cor.12:12). This incident alone demonstrates the dangers of using Acts as a template for Christian practice today.³⁴

Acts 2 - At the first Pentecost, the Holy Spirit's advent was accompanied by "a sound like the blowing of a violent wind", and "what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest" on all the assembled, resulting in a mass evangelism of the crowd in Jerusalem. These are unique events that never happened before or after. The complete lack of any frame of reference among the Jewish throng that witnesses these events – "What does this mean?" (Acts 2:12); "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37) – demonstrates the magnitude of the alteration of circumstances the just-begun Church Age produced, and thus shows in turn the need for a transitional period to make the adjustments this change of dispensations required. Peter's recommendation of water-baptism in his gospel message was also unique (different from the afterthought allowance in Acts chapter ten): not only did this ritual bring the new believers into solidarity with those who had accepted John's testimony about Jesus Christ, but it also – as Peter says – provided the opportunity for the apostles to lay hands on these new believers and mediate the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38: ". . . and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"); later (as at Acts ten), this would not be necessary, but at this early stage it was important for the apostles' authority to be established.

The special time of fellowship given to this original group of believers thereafter was also unique (Acts 2:42-47). We should not expect any longer for believers to sell their possessions and live in a communal situation (that is the stuff of cults and religious legalism, and is just the sort of misapplication of Acts we are warning about here); but at that particular point in the history of the Church Age, this gave these new believers the time and space for a quick start in spiritual growth necessary to accelerate the expansion and development of the Church at a pace sufficient to gain and retain the momentum Pentecost produced.

Acts 3 - By the time he wrote the book of Hebrews, Paul told the Jerusalem believers in no uncertain terms that continuing in the temple rites and sacrifices amounted to "crucifying the Son of God afresh" (Heb.6:6), and "trampling the Son of God underfoot" (Heb.10:29); but at this early time, for Peter and John to visit the temple was a natural thing to do, and the Spirit used it to perform an astounding miracle (of the sort which, it needs to be noted, are not happening today in such a way) in healing the man lame from birth, a miracle which contributed greatly to the expansion of the community of faith (Acts 4:4), another special and unique development. During his speech on *this* occasion, moreover, it will be noted that now Peter says nothing about water-baptism (compare Acts 3:19 with Acts 2:38).

³⁴ For the details, see Peter lesson #2.

Acts 4 - At the commencement of Peter's speech to the Sanhedrin he is said to be "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 4:4), a special empowerment along the lines of what we are promised in similar situations during the Tribulation (Matt.10:19-20; Mk.13:11; Lk.12:11-12). So obvious is it that this defense was only possible through the power of God that even these hardened unbelievers were impressed (Acts 4:13). In the assembly of believers which followed, prayers for boldness in the face of the threats from the powerful not to teach in Jesus' Name were met by a miraculous earthquake, and an additional special empowerment of the Spirit for the promotion of the gospel (Acts 4:31). We are told here as well that the practice of selling possessions to support this special evangelical effort during this unique time continued (though there is no mention of it after Acts 5), and that during this time the Spirit mightily and specially empowered the apostles' witness to the truth, giving them a unique measure of grace in the eyes of all (i.e., both for the reception of the gospel and for their protection from all who opposed their efforts: Acts 4:33). Later, we find, in Paul's case especially, opponents being allowed to actively oppose, punish, and imprison believers. The example of "Christian communism", as this unique and not meant to be prescriptive special time is sometimes described, only obtained for that brief period following Pentecost when because of largely passive opposition and oppression believers were ostracized and most likely unable to find work. Later, after outright persecution caused the dispersion of believers, this procedure is never followed again. Thereafter, believers are expected to work for a living as Paul says very clearly, "if anyone will not work, neither shall he eat" (2Thes.3:10 NKJV).

Acts 5 - Directly after the first giving of the Law and the commandments regarding the Sabbath day, a man who violated the stricture against work was commanded by the Lord to be stoned for gathering wood (Num.15:32-36). This was a unique and never again mentioned as repeated example of the importance of following the Law, designed as an "inaugural" lesson to Israel (even though violating the Law in many points became more the rule than the exception in all the following centuries). The example of Ananias and Sapphira being miraculously put to death for "lying to the Holy Spirit" about the actual amount they had contributed to the common purse had a similar purpose – and likewise is something never repeated again. As the actual Church expanded, it was inevitable that the church-visible, that is, the apparent community of faith, composed of unbelievers and marginal believers as well as those truly dedicated to the Lord, would become less pure (cf. 1Jn.2:19). Therefore it was important for the seriousness of the truth and its sanctity to be demonstrated in principle for the Church Age as it was for the Age of Israel (cf. Eph.4:25; 4:30; 1Thes.5:19).

We find no more miraculous and immediate cases of the "sin unto death", even in the book of Acts. Moreover, from the context it is clear that Peter was told about this by the Spirit, analogous to the way in which, e.g., Elisha was miraculously informed (compare 2Ki.6:12 versus 2Ki.4:27 and Acts 5:3), but we do not find this to be common later on, even among the apostles.

Acts 5:12-16 records an amazing time of signs, wonders and healings which were all the more notable on account of the rarity such periods previously and on account of the magnitude and multitude of the miracles performed (outside of our Lord's first advent, only Paul's experience at

Ephesus seems to have rivaled this special time: Acts 19:11-12). The miraculous protection and deliverance of the apostles from prison through visible angelic intervention in Acts 5:17-42 is accompanied by direct heavenly instructions ("Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life": Acts 5:20 NKJV). The result of the trial wherein their lives are spared through the intervention by Gamaliel, however, does result in them being scourged – a sure indication that things were beginning to normalize in terms of the directly miraculous protection the apostles and other Christian evangelists and missionaries would receive in the future (cf. 2Cor.11:23-28).

Acts 6 - The appointment of "servants" ("deacons") in an official capacity to take care of growing responsibilities within the Jerusalem church is most instructive. We note that the apostles were not given any direct instructions from God about this. Rather, their approach is a common sense one, designed to solve a problem without compromising what was really important, the ministering of the Word of God. We find a similar development in Israel when Moses likewise takes his father-in-law's excellent advice in appointing subordinate leaders (Ex.18:17-26). Several important points are to be gleaned from this development: 1) administration in a local church, any local church, should be tailored to the specific needs of that church; it should not be written in stone (like the Law) because the composition of churches and the circumstances in which they minister are ever in flux; 2) administration should be the handmaiden of the true purpose of any church, namely, the ministry of the Word of God – and *not* the other way around as is frequently the case in our day; 3) the behavior of these early believers in continuing to make distinctions between Jews and gentiles demonstrates quite clearly that the transition still had a long way to go at this point.

Acts 7 - The patience with which the hostile crowd listens to Stephen's lengthy speech is a mark of the Spirit's provision of a special hearing. We are told at the end of the previous chapter that his appearance was, literally, angelic (Acts 6:15). This special dispensation of grace, the special martyrdom Stephen endured, and his special vision of the Lord, are all quite unique and indicative of this special time of transition. This incident and the exceptional treatment of it by the Spirit acts as distinctive punctuation to the end of this period of remarkable unity in the early Jerusalem church, for it is followed in the next chapter by persecution and dispersal, both of which in their own way contribute to the growth of the Church (which would not have happened if things never moved beyond Jerusalem or if opposition was never allowed to arise: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth": Acts 1:8; "And so they were scattered, and went off in different directions, giving the gospel wherever they went": Acts 8:4). So again we see the Spirit carefully directing events in a most unique way during this time of transition so as to bring the Church safely through to the other side of our age's inaugural period.

Acts 8 - The Samaritans were "neither fish nor fowl", neither fully Jewish nor fully gentile, and are thus usually described as separate from both. In this regard, they have a foot in both camps, so to speak, and as a result functioned in these early days as a sort of stepping stone between Israel and the gentiles in the expansion of the Church. The process of bringing the gospel to the

Samaritans would force the apostles and other early Christians to rethink things to some degree and open them up to the possibilities of carrying the gospel to regions and peoples beyond Jerusalem and Judea. If the Samaritans would accept Christ, why not the gentiles? Ministering to the Samaritans, a people who, while not Jewish did follow many aspects of the Law, would also be a far less jarring thing for the early evangelists to do, requiring less flexibility on their part in matters of behavior and "Law keeping" than would be the case later in regard to, e.g., the Greeks.

We note that Philip was the one who took the lead in evangelizing Samaria. We are not told what prompted him to do so, but are most definitely not told that he was sent by the Jerusalem church. Later, when they receive word that Samaria was responding to the gospel, we are told that "[the apostles] sent Peter and John" as well (Acts 8:14). At this point, the Holy Spirit was not yet falling upon new believers at the point of faith in Christ. Rather, this gift was still being mediated by the apostles through the laying on of their hands (in order to demonstrate their authority), and it was thus that the new believers in Samaria received the Spirit.

Returning to Jerusalem, we are told that Peter and John evangelized other Samaritan villages, and thus, in company with the ministrations of the believers dispersed throughout Judea as a result of the persecution (who "spread the gospel wherever they went": Acts 8:4), three of the four areas of evangelization mandated by our Lord were thus reached: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8; cf. Lk.24:47). The last area, the entire world, clearly meant not just the Jews of Jerusalem, not just the Jews living elsewhere in the land, and not just the Samaritans who likewise lived nearby, but gentiles around the world. The distance was truly great, and not just geographically. To transform men steeped in Judaism and the Law – and thus naturally considering everything gentile as impure – into evangelists who would bring the gospel and the revealed mysteries about Jesus Christ to the nations would require no less than the moving and quickening of the Holy Spirit Himself.

To begin this process, it is most understandable that the Spirit would make use of another stepping stone, namely, non-Jews who were yet not completely abominable to the lights of quondam followers of the Law of Moses, namely, proselytes to Judaism from among the gentiles. The very first step is again taken by Philip, and in this instance he is given direct orders from an angel to meet the Ethiopian official. Here we have a man who was most definitely a proselyte, reading from the book of Isaiah having just gone to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. Not surprisingly, Philip finds this man an extremely willing listener, and easily brings him to Christ. For readers of Acts, we see from this event – Philip's demonstration from scripture that the Messiah was always destined to suffer for the sins of the world – that the apostles' "gospel" and our "gospel" are of course one and the same and precisely so (despite modern theology's attempts to obfuscate this issue). The request to be baptized with water comes from the Ethiopian, not from anything Philip had said – though he no doubt did speak of the ministry of John, the Messiah's herald. We learn from this that it was natural for anyone of that day and in orbit of traditional Judaism who came to Christ to wish to be part in every way of the fellowship of those who had followed Jesus from the beginning, starting with John's ministry of preparation. That is a far cry, however, from making water-baptism an acceptable thing to do today, given that said

generation is long departed on the one hand, and that the confusion such a practice brings regarding the heralding of the Messiah's coming – the true meaning of the practice – is not to be underestimated. At this point, the distinction did not yet register with Philip (or with the other apostles, for that matter). But there was a practical reason for Philip to do as requested on this occasion as well: to do as Peter did on the day of Pentecost, namely, to mediate the gift of the Spirit in the process (following at this time the example of Peter and John at Acts 8:17).

Acts 9 - Paul's epiphany was miraculous in every way. To appreciate that fully it is necessary to read all three descriptions of it given to us by Luke (in addition to our context in Acts 9:1-19, the other two are to be found at Acts 22:6-16 and Acts 26:12-18). Such a unique conversion wherein Paul was given to see our resurrected, glorified Lord and to receive instructions directly from Him was appropriate in the case of the special 12th apostle, the one who was marked out by the Lord to take the lead in bringing the Church to the next step. As our Lord told Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15 NKJV; cf. Acts 13:2).

Acts 10 - Although Paul would be the preeminent "apostle to the gentiles" (cf. Gal.2:9), that did not mean that our Lord's commission to the others had been abrogated (Acts 1:8; cf. Matt.28:18-20; Lk.24:47). In addition to his gospel and three epistles, John in particular would be given the honor of placing the capstone on the New Testament with the book of Revelation, wherein seven gentile churches – which stand for the seven eras of the Church Age – are the initial recipients. Peter too would write two blessed letters to a gentile audience (1Pet.1:1-2; 2Pet.1:1), and was given the privilege in our present chapter of presiding over what is often called "the gentile Pentecost", that is, the gift of the Spirit to a gentile assembly directly from God and without hands-on apostolic mediation.

Several things about the conversion of Cornelius and his household pertinent to the purpose of our survey need to be pointed out here. Prior to this, Peter had never entered a gentile household (Acts 10:28), a pointed indication that the apostles had not yet entirely grasped the necessity of the mission with which they had been entrusted of evangelizing the world. Helping him overcome his (understandable if not acceptable) prejudices required 1) a very detailed and thrice repeated waking vision from the Spirit wherein the lesson regarding not considering gentiles unclean was dramatically driven home; 2) a direct, audible command from the Spirit Himself to go with the men who were seeking him; 3) the report he was given by them of the vision of the angel giving specific instructions to send for him personally; and 4) the actual experience of seeing the Spirit coming upon these gentiles at the point of faith. Only then did Peter begin to understand that the gentiles were being called to salvation, and that they too would receive the Holy Spirit. And only then did it fully register with him that it was this baptism of the Spirit to which all such prophecy was directed (not water-baptism; as we have seen, Peter's after-the-fact allowance of that ritual on this occasion served to include the gentiles in all that their Jewish brethren had experienced).

The lengths to which it was necessary for the Spirit to go to provoke a proper response from the

leader of the eleven – and to bring him to the point of understanding the implications of what the Lord had prophesied and what the Spirit was now beginning to bring about – make it less than surprising that the Jewish believers of Jerusalem were not immediately ready to transition from the Law to grace (or to accept fellowship with the gentiles and their growing inclusion in the actual Church: Acts 11:2ff.). Indeed, it is not too much to say that the entire history of the church-visible since has been tied up in conflicts on this essential point of leaving the Law and its practices behind. And all who have embraced legalism in place of grace ever since have likewise failed to recognize that the transition we are examining was essential to the filling up of the Body of Christ with its gentile complement – a matter of prophecy for all willing to accept the truth.

And He said, "It is too small a thing for you to be My servant, to establish the tribes of Jacob and to restore the sanctified ones of Israel. Therefore I have appointed you as a Light for the nations, to be My [instrument of] salvation to the ends of the earth."
Isaiah 49:6

Acts 11 - It is significant that the reaction of the majority of believers in Jerusalem to the news that the gentiles had received the Word of God was, rather than rejoicing, to criticize Peter for giving it to them. It is also significant that Peter is required to give a defense of his actions, and we will see later as well that this is not the only occasion upon which the putative leader of the eleven is acting in a manner not fully commensurate with his apostolic authority.

In the second half of the chapter we find the Word being spread by believers dispersed pursuant to persecution, and even here in the early going "only to Jews". But a few men – not from Jerusalem or Judea but of Cyprus and Cyrene – did begin to evangelize gentiles in Antioch, and at this point we see the Jerusalem church beginning to make the transition of acceptance, sending Barnabas to aid in the effort. Barnabas brought Paul into the work and so we see that even the great apostle to the gentiles needed an opening and an opportunity to be prompted to begin his ministry. The famine predicted by Agabus and the contributions coming from gentile believers to the Jewish believers in Judea brought things full-circle for the first time, with the Church finally functioning as one body, with gentiles aiding Jews having been previously helped by them – but this was not yet the end of the time of teething.

Acts 12 - This chapter relates, standing between the commencement of Paul and Barnabas' ministry to the gentiles at Antioch and their first missionary journey in the next chapter, the beginning of the end of the apostolic period. With the death of John's brother James, never replaced (as there are only twelve apostles of the Lamb), it becomes clear that the apostolic period would not last forever, for it would not endure beyond the lifetimes of the twelve. Our Lord's miraculous deliverance of Peter from prison and execution, and His likewise miraculous elimination of the threat to the apostles from Herod, puts a divine exclamation point on the rejection of the Jerusalem church as the primary focal point in the history of the Church Age. It was never God's plan for any one place, not Jerusalem, not Rome, not Byzantium, to have centralized control over the by-divine-design decentralized Church of our age, and so Jerusalem had to decline in importance for this purpose to be accomplished (Gal.4:25-26; Heb.12:18-24; cf.

Gal.1:17-19; 2:1-10).

From this point forward, the focus now shifts to the Jews and Jewish proselytes of the diaspora and to the gentiles throughout the Mediterranean and wider world – to the ends of the earth, eventually, in keeping with our Lord's prophesy (Acts 1:8; Lk.24:47). The apostles would continue to minister in ways and places some about which we know and some of which are merely hinted at in church tradition, but it would be their efforts beyond Jerusalem and Judea that contributed to the now rapidly growing Church and to the coming end of this time of uniqueness, this time of transition from the Age of Israel to the Age of the Church.

Acts 13 - The direct and audibly verbal instigation by the Spirit Himself of the so-called first missionary journey, while demonstrating continuing prior uncertainty even among the most devoted believers regarding the wider evangelization of the gentiles, also makes clear that this next phase of transition, far from being incidental or accidental, was desired and planned and empowered by God Himself – and that it had to be or else it would never have happened. That direction is true not only of Paul and Barnabas' commissioning but also of their choice of routes, for we are told that they were "sent on their way by the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:4).

The first recipients of this new effort were the Jewish synagogues, and reasonably so. The Jews and Jewish proselytes of the diaspora were a natural "stepping stone" to the broader evangelization of the gentiles, one without doubt providentially provided by God Himself (even if many so blessed did not deign themselves worthy of eternal life: Acts 13:46). The brush-fire spread of the Word throughout the areas in which this threesome of Paul, Barnabas and John Mark ministered, was an amazing development, planned and arranged by the Lord with the result that all "ordained to eternal life" came to hear and believe (Acts 13:48). Resistance from Jewish sources (from the sorcerer Elymas on Cyprus, from Jews jealous of gentile enthusiasm and response at Pisidian Antioch), was not allowed to stop their witness, with the result that "the Word of the Lord spread through the whole region" (Acts 13:49 NIV).

Herein we also see a pattern that would continue, a consequence of the prophesied "hardness in part" that afflicts Israel even today – and a demonstration of the necessity of God's shifting of the focus of the Church Age away from Jerusalem and Judea (and the temple and the Law) towards a decentralized, largely gentile Church wherein the truth of the Word of God, not the rites and strictures of Judaism, would be the next focus going forward during this new "fulness of times" (Gal.4:4; Eph.1:10; cf. Mk.1:15; Jn.1:16; Heb.9:26). Significantly as well, it is during this first journey that Paul is called Paul for the first time, presenting himself with his Greek, gentile name, and not with his Hebrew, Jewish name, a clear indication that he was and would be willing to make the painful breaks with the tradition he loved necessary to serve the wider Body of Christ.

(19) Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. (20) 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. (21) 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. (22) To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. (23) I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

1st Corinthians 9:19-23 NKJV

Acts 14 - The evangelizing of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe follows the same blessed pattern of the Spirit using dramatic miracles to reach the great reservoir of latent positivity to the truth of the gospel, and of those among the Jewish and proselyte populations who are unwilling to respond reacting with violent hostility – to the point where Paul was stoned. But the Spirit raised him from the dead (cf. 2Cor.12:2-5), a most miraculous event befitting a most unique time in the history of the Church Age: the great apostle to the gentiles had much more work to do (and much suffering to endure: 1Cor.4:8-13; 2Cor.4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:16-33; Phil.3:7-11) before the Lord called him home.

Before returning to Antioch, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the new churches composed of those who had responded to their evangelizing efforts (Acts 14:23), and this demonstrates the unique apostolic authority to do so (not to mention the wisdom coming from a special endowment of the Spirit to make good decisions in doing so). This appointment of men to guide the new churches all at once with no time for prior preparation or vetting or natural development of local leadership only happened during the apostolic era. And indeed, it only could have happened then. For this was the time of special gifts given for teaching and edification (such as prophecy, wisdom, knowledge, faith, discerning of spirits, tongues in concert with the gift of interpretation), gifts which (as with apostleship) would cease to be given when this era was over, but gifts which at this time were vitally necessary for the edification of these new congregations. That is because, as yet, there was no New Testament to teach the depths of the mystery of Jesus Christ and His Church (Mk.4:11; Rom.16:25; 1Cor.2:7; 4:1; Eph.3:3; 3:9; 6:19; Col.1:26-27; 4:3; 1Tim.3:16), nor had there been time to prepare men gifted as pastor-teachers to function in that role (1Tim.3:1-13; Tit.1:5-9; 1Pet.5:1-4).

In addition to the critical step of providing for their converts' future spiritual growth, on their return the apostles also made a point of revisiting these new churches and strengthening them through teaching the truth (Acts 14:22) – an important thing to note: the job of evangelizing is not over once a person or persons turn to Christ; rather, it has then only just begun – because "the gospel" is the entirety of the good news about Jesus Christ (e.g., Rom.1:15; Eph.6:19; 1Thes.3:2). The missionaries encouraged these new believers to "remain true to the faith", because without the endurance and perseverance of faith there is no salvation, and they did what they could personally to build up that faith (in addition to making provision for continuation of growth once they were gone). Even apostles need a base of operation, and we see in their report to the church at Antioch how that it was functioning as the "home church" for Paul and Barnabas at this time – not the Jerusalem church.

Acts 15 - Often overlooked in this chapter wherein the so-called "Jerusalem council" gives its

decision regarding the gentiles and the Law is that the church in Antioch was functioning perfectly well – and indeed had been the launch-point for the first missionary journey whence our Lord's prophecy and mandate was now beginning to be fulfilled. The "input" from Jerusalem was entirely negative at first. Certain individuals, not restrained by the apostles in Jerusalem, had come to Antioch with the express purpose of attempting to force the gentile believers to follow the Law. In other words, the influence of Jerusalem on this occasion was at first entirely directed towards bringing things back around to the way Judaism had managed the Church beyond Israel *before* the coming of the Messiah. Had this effort been successful, it would have had the effect of rolling back the new wave of evangelism, killing off the grace ministry to the gentiles with a counter-wave of legalism.

Herein we see Paul and Barnabas taking the lead in resisting this wrong-headed impetus. Whereas these two great men ought to have been expending their efforts on moving the Church forward, on this occasion they had to take pains to ensure that it was not rocked violently backward. The upshot of course was the letter making "concessions" to the gentiles, asking them only to avoid certain pagan behaviors which were especially offensive to Jewish believers. And these were reasonable requests. What is interesting is that while Peter's testimony is of critical importance, James is the one who takes the lead in settling the issue. In the Lord's eyes, Peter and certainly also Paul were the ones truly in authority. Disrespect for genuine divine authority is nothing new, of course (as most any of Israel's prophets could testify), but it would take some time until the apostles fully recognized what they had been given (even then, acting with humility; cf. 2Pet.1:12-21; 3Jn.1:9-12 for Peter, John and Paul respectively; and see the entire book of Hebrews).

Besides showing us that even these great apostolic believers were not perfect, the split between Paul and Barnabas chronicled at the end of the chapter produced a divergence in missionary activity reflective of the acceleration of the growth and expansion of the Church indirectly and apart from apostolic direction at that, as seeds planted produced even more in turn (so that, for example, we have a vibrant church in Rome early on, even before any apostolic visits; cf. Rom.1:8-12; 16:1-16).

Acts 16 - Paul's circumcision of Timothy in the early days of his second missionary journey – "because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek" – is indicative of the residual influence of the Law on that great apostle, and of Paul's natural desire to focus on Jewish concerns in order not to in any way diminish his ministry to the Jews (in spite of being "the" apostle to the gentiles; cf. Rom.11:13-14). This is also to be seen in the group's promulgating of the decision of the Jerusalem council to these new gentile believers (Acts 16:4); but we also see in this chapter that the Spirit is the One who is actually in charge, preventing Paul and company from proceeding as they had intended (Acts 16:6-8), and instead directing them by supernatural guidance to enter mainland Greece for the first time. This would be a critical development in the transformation of Paul's ministry from being overly Judeo-centric.

The initial contact with potential believers in Philippi followed the standard pattern of going "to

the Jews first" (Acts 16:13), but the first to respond was a gentile proselyte to Judaism, Lydia. The water-baptism which followed of Lydia and her household (likewise within the Jewish orbit through her influence and direction) would certainly have been attended by the mediation of the Holy Spirit as Paul placed his hands upon them (cf. Acts 19:6). The exorcism of the servant girl and the satanic opposition that occasioned it and followed it demonstrate that the evil one and his followers were well aware of the importance of what the Lord was working through these apostles (cf. Acts 19:15). But in spite of the injustice and painful beating that Paul and Silas suffered as a result, the Lord used all this to bring about another notable conversion as the Philippian jailer responded to the miracle of the earthquake.

In addition to the uniqueness of all of these events, we should not overlook the fact that this last incident marks another turning point, namely, the building opposition not only from Jewish sources but from representatives of the Roman state as well. The resistance that would have to be endured and overcome for Paul in particular to carry out the mission the Lord had given him was immense (e.g., 1Cor.4:8-13; 2Cor.4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:16-33; Phil.3:7-11), but not by any means impossible for the Spirit of God.

(15) But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. (16) I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Acts 9:15-16 NIV

Acts 17 - With the continuation of Paul's missionary journey through Greece, we see the same pattern repeated in Thessalonica and Berea: initial witness to the Jewish population, expansion of the message to the gentiles who receive it, jealousy and resistance from that part of the Jewish population who refuse to accept Christ. Paul's approach in Athens follows the same lines, but we also see here a shift in emphasis. For while he is reported to have spoken with the Jewish population and proselytes in the synagogue there, he also spent a great deal of time and effort in the *agora*, the Athenian marketplace (which was the central meeting point for Athens), evangelizing all and sundry. This effort gained him a hearing before the famous Areopagus, the Athenian council, and led to the salvation of a number of gentiles directly (that is, not through their attendance of the synagogue).

Acts 18 - Paul's lengthy stay in Corinth – a year and a half – is also a new development from his previous pattern, one directed by a vision from the Lord (Acts 18:9-10). Beginning in his standard way, that is, making initial contacts through the Jewish population and the local synagogue, the Spirit gave exceptional success as the Lord had promised, as well as protection from the past pattern of being persecuted and driven out as was the case in most cities in the past, also in accord with the vision he received from the Lord. The upshot was the blossoming of a large community of believers in Corinth (about whom much can be gleaned from the two epistles he later wrote them), a city geographically and commercially very well situated for the expansion and spread of the truth (Corinth being the traditional gateway between east and west as well as north and south in the ancient Mediterranean world).

At the conclusion of this seminal stay, Paul had his head shorn "for a vow", then returned, not to Jerusalem, but to Antioch, after having stopped over in Ephesus (a future place of ministry). The Church was transitioning, and Paul was too as these two actions demonstrate: on the one hand he had not yet fully let go of past practices, but on the other hand he had clearly come to understand that his mission had to do with looking forward, towards the evangelization of the gentiles (which the "missionary church" of Antioch represented), and not backward, towards the Law-keeping nation state of Israel (which the church at Jerusalem represented).

The ministry of Apollos, following his instruction by the two stalwart believers Paul left behind at Ephesus, namely, Aquila and Priscilla (she gets first mention earlier in the chapter), also marks an important turning point in the development of the transition between the Age of Israel and the Church Age. First, we see a man who is a believer and who is evangelizing for the Lord, but without understanding some of the newly revealed Church Age mystery doctrines (such as those concerning the Holy Spirit). Second, we find two believers who were close confidants of Paul acting to instruct him more particularly in the truth (without Paul even being on the scene). Third, we note that none of these three were apostles (not with a capital "A"). And fourth, when so instructed and desiring to be of help to the believers in Achaia, these two outstanding believers (who would later even have a church meeting in their home, both at Corinth and in Rome: Rom.16:3; 1Cor.16:19), organize and support an introduction for Apollos to continue his work there, with the result that the church in Corinth is edified (and Apollos would go on to continue with the Lord's work: 1Cor.16:12; Tit.3:13). All of these things happened without direct apostolic action; all of these things were the result of seeds already planted and work already done. This would be the pattern for much of the expansion during the rest of the apostolic era (and for all future expansion after the apostles passed), especially for the considerable time that still remained in the apostolic era after the book of Acts comes to a close.

Acts 19 - Paul's extended stay in Ephesus, two years (Acts 19:10), builds on the pattern established in Corinth. Beginning with the synagogue, and persevering with the Jewish and proselyte population assembling in that venue for three months, at the end of this time Paul moved the meeting place for the church of believers who had responded to his ministry to a habitual place, the School of Tyrannus. Paul taught the Ephesian believers daily, and as a result the outreach from Ephesus was the most profound yet: "all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10).

We also find in this chapter a significant development in Paul's understanding of this time of transition. In coming across a group of twelve believers who had been baptized with John's baptism, but who had not yet received the Holy Spirit (as in the early days of the transition the apostles were given to mediate this gift – especially necessary in the case of believers such as these who were already believers before Pentecost), Paul explains that John's baptism – water-baptism – was "a baptism of repentance saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus" (Acts 19:4); upon hearing this, the Spirit placed these men into union with Christ (the text reads "into the Person of the Lord Jesus"; *eis to onoma*); and when Paul placed his hands on them, they received the indwelling of the Holy

Spirit, accompanied at this time by signs similar to those given both at Pentecost and "the gentile Pentecost". This miraculous occurrence was another example of "transitional uniqueness".

In very short order, because of the ever diminishing number of pre-Pentecost believers without the Spirit, and because the authority of the apostles had been sufficiently established, the mediation of the gift by an apostle's hand ceased to be necessary as all from then on received the Spirit at the point of faith in Christ (as is the case with all of us today: Rom.8:9; 2Cor.1:22; Gal.3:2). During this period the Spirit provided other uniquely miraculous supports to this important apostolic ministry effort, working all manner of miracles and healings at the hands of Paul, including the driving out of demons, and causing the seven Jewish exorcists to be refuted most dramatically when they attempted to claim equal abilities. The powerful witness of the Spirit through Paul had the effect of the spreading of the Word far and wide (Acts 19:10; 19:20), and resulted in a mass, spontaneous turning away from demonic influences and a voluntary public burning of magical texts never heard of before or since. We also see the Spirit at work in protecting Paul in this extended stay in a manner similar to what had happened in Corinth. On this occasion, opposition does not arise from Jewish sources, but from pagan ones as the spread of the faith had become dramatic enough to alarm those making a living from pagan relics in fear of the demise of their religion. Instead of being able to suppress or arrest or otherwise harm Paul, however, the Spirit worked things out on this occasion as well so that the authorities sided against those creating the uproar.

Acts 20 to the end of Acts - The next phase of Paul's travels (calling it a "journey" masks the fact that it had lasted many years at this point), finds the apostle revisiting the Macedonian churches, spending three months in Achaia (no doubt based in Corinth), and returning to Asia minor through Macedonia, ministering next at Troas. Here, Paul taught the assembled believers late into the night – demonstrating as was the case throughout his ministry the importance of the Word of God to everything he did. A young man named Eutychus drifted into sleep, fell from the upper story and was killed as a result. But the Spirit empowered Paul to restore the young man to life, demonstrating very emphatically – as if there were any doubt about it at this point – Paul's apostolic authority (since only our Lord and Peter and the great prophets of the past, Elijah and Elisha, had otherwise accomplished this miracle). From Troas, the group makes their way by separate routes to Miletus. Paul's purpose was, we are told, to make every effort to be in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, and for this reason he purposely avoided Ephesus, instead calling the elders of the churches there to meet him in Miletus.

Paul had been away a very long time. For a man like Paul who had studied in Jerusalem at the feet of the famous rabbi Gamaliel, for a man like Paul who had obeyed the commandment of the Law to be present at the three major festivals every year, this absence had no doubt placed a heavy emotional burden upon the apostle. And even though we have come to understand through this study that the Law had been replaced, that the Church was now being filled up with gentiles who were not subject to the Law, and though we know – by way of hindsight – that the Lord would completely remove the temple and the priesthood not too many years hence, we can understand the sentimental pull that Jerusalem and this festival had for the apostle Paul. But he

was "the apostle to the gentiles", and we know from what scripture later states that this journey was a mistake (Acts 21:4; 21:11; cf. Acts 20:22-23; 21:23-26). Instead of bypassing Ephesus – a place of growing belief – Paul should have bypassed Jerusalem, a place which represented the past and which would later come in for some of his sternest correction (i.e., in the book of Hebrews).

The decision to go to Jerusalem begins a new phase in Paul's career and is emblematic of the last phase of the apostolic era, the time of transition between the Age of Israel and the Church Age. Paul's agreement to be involved in a Jewish ritual in the temple was clearly not something he had anticipated, and the rationale behind it, to demonstrate to Jewish Law-keepers in Jerusalem that "you yourself live/walk keeping the Law" was at the very least intensely hypocritical. Paul had fought against circumcision for the gentiles (Acts 15:1ff.), and prided himself on not yielding to those who resisted grace empowered by the Spirit for the sake of the Law which had now been replaced (Gal.2:4-5). More than any other believer alive at this point, Paul probably had come to understand that the Law and everything connected with it was being replaced by the Spirit (even as it had been rendered null and void by the cross – because Christ had thus fulfilled it). This lapse on his part, brought on by putting himself in a position of weakness through sentimental attachment to tradition, resulted in many years of trial and imprisonment. But it also completed the necessary break and distance between the past and the future that this greatest of the apostles clearly needed in order to achieve everything the Lord wanted from him:

(15) But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. (16) I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Acts 9:15-16 NIV

"Quick!" [the Lord] said to me. "Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.

Acts 22:18 NIV

Then the Lord said to me, "Go; I will send you far away to the gentiles".

Acts 22:21 NIV

(17) "I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them (18) to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

Acts 26:17-18 NIV

"Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!"

Acts 28:28 NIV

In the process of Paul's arrest and trials and journey to Rome, we are blessed with a number of

inspiring speeches and given to see the great faith of this greatest apostle under the most extreme pressure. We also know from the rest of scripture that this imprisonment provided him with the opportunity – and necessity – of writing the bulk of his epistles, and of organizing the Church from the central location of Rome.

(12) But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, (13) so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ.

Philippians 1:12-13 NKJV

Paul would go on to minister the gospel in Spain, eventually being executed as a martyr for Jesus Christ once his race was run. The only other direct communication we know about hereafter that he had with the Jerusalem church was the book of Hebrews, and that is an impassioned plea to all believers there to put Jesus Christ ahead of the rituals and traditions which have now been replaced. And not too many years hence, we find Peter ministering from Rome to the gentiles in Asia minor, and John doing likewise from Asia minor itself after Peter's departure, making the transition to a gentile-focused Church devoid of the rituals of the Law complete (as the Petrine and Johannine epistles clearly demonstrate).

In other words, while Acts ends before the apostolic period does, Luke was given to bring that important book to a point sufficient for us to see the key transition it is meant to explain on the very cusp of its completion. The additional details are to be found in the epistles, and that is most appropriate. For the completion of the New Testament is, in fact, the crowning jewel of the transition from the Age of Israel, the entire "mind of Christ" now available to all who want the truth, spelling out in detail the fullness of the mystery of Christ and His Church.

(16) So don't let anyone judge you in regard to food or drink, or in the category of festival observances, be it of new moons or Sabbaths. (17) All these things are shadows of what was to come, but the reality has to do with Christ.

Colossians 2:16-17

d. The Perfect Word of God and the End of the Transition

The advent of the Son of Man was the most amazing thing in the history of the world – and it was in fact the pivot around which history turns, centered at the cross. In proclaiming the kingdom that His coming victory would bring in, our Lord attracted the attention of the nation of Israel, but few were much interested in what He had to say. They were interested in being healed; they were interested in the miracles; they were interested in the glories of the kingdom they had anticipated, a kingdom which in their warped thinking had everything to do with earthly glory rather than the glory of God, little considering just what it would cost Him to bring it in, and never imagining that the spiritual had to proceed the material, that the cross had to come before the crown (Jn.6:15; 6:25-60).

For this reason, namely, the actual hardness of heart among those to whom He came (Jn.1:11),

our Lord gave them the truth, but He did so in parables in a way that allowed them to hear it but not understand it – since they were not interested in doing so. Even the disciples, to whom it was "given to know the mysteries of the kingdom" were slow to understand. But while those who were unwilling to accept a Messiah who had to be crucified for them had even this truth taken away from them in the end (cf. Matt.25:28), His true disciples eventually did fulfill our Lord's prediction that "more would be given, even unto abundance" (cf. Matt.25:29). This would not be an overnight occurrence, however. It would require them witnessing the actual events of the cross and the resurrection. It would require the gift of the Holy Spirit. And it would require that they learn the truth just as we all do, making it part of the storehouse of spiritual treasures in our heart by believing it in the Spirit. But while we have the entire New Testament, the disciples-soon-to-be-apostles did not . . . yet. They had heard our Lord's teachings personally, and the Spirit would remind them of all He said (Jn.14:26). Among all of the other duties they would have while taking the lead in the transition from the Age of Israel to the Age of the Church, theirs would be the blessed task of penning the gospels and the epistles which together would complete the Word of God, so that all who belong to the Church in this age might "grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ" (Eph.4:15).

(10) And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"
(11) He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. (12) For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."

Matthew 13:10-12 NKJV

(11) And He said to them, "To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, (12) so that 'Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; lest they should turn, and their sins be forgiven them' (Is.6:9-10)."

Mark 4:11-12 NKJV

And He said, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that 'Seeing they may not see, And hearing they may not understand' (Is.6:9)."

Luke 8:10 NKJV

As the One who embodies the mystery of God (Col.1:27), salvation through God-become-man dying for the sins of the world, it was fitting for our Lord – whose Name, "Jesus", means salvation ("the Lord saves"), to begin the unveiling of the mystery doctrines later to be fully revealed in the New Testament epistles. Our Lord's teachings connect the shadows of the Law which pointed to Him to the "clarity" (Gk. *parrēsia*) of the epistles (2Cor.3:12-18; Eph.6:19-20; Phil.1:20; 1Thes.2:2; cf. Mk.8:32; Jn.10:24; Acts 2:29; 9:27-28). During His final days with the disciples soon to be apostles, our Lord began to wean them more fully into the revealed truth about Him.

His disciples said to Him, "See, now You are speaking plainly (*parrēsia*), and using no figure of speech!"

John 16:29 NKJV

Even so, their ability to discern the new revelation of truth which our Lord's incarnation, sacrifice and resurrection embodied was limited before the coming of the Spirit (e.g., Matt.28:17; Jn.20:24-29; Acts 1:15-26), and required, as we have seen, the Spirit's guidance and prodding along with a not inconsiderable time for them to be able to digest the changes that the coming of the Lord and His victory in the cross had wrought. As they did so and when they did so, the Spirit brought our Lord's teachings to their remembrance (Jn.14:26), and led them to understand the implications of the shift of dispensations these events had brought about. These were new times – a new age, in fact. And they required new teachings, a New Testament, not different in essential doctrine or substance from what had preceded, but different in the sense of being crystal clear in their revelation, illuminating in fact the underlying truths of the Old, driving away its shadows with the brilliant light of the glory of the truth of the New fully revealed.

(36) He told them this parable: "No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. (37) And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. (38) No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. (39) And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, 'The old is better.' "

Luke 5:36-39 NIV (cf. Matt.9:14-17; Mk.2:18-22)

With these words our Lord foreshadows and more than implies that the regime of the Law under the nation of God, Israel, was about to come to an end once He had fulfilled that Law through His spiritual death on Calvary's cross. With His resurrection which followed, everything would become new. The gift of the Holy Spirit, impossible before His victory (Jn.7:39), would allow for the spread of the gospel as never before – and for the reception of the truth as never before. While the Old Testament looked forward to Christ and to the cross through shadow rituals which represented Him and His sacrifice, through the New Testament epistles the Holy Spirit would reveal the brilliance of the unveiled truth in the face of Jesus Christ (2Cor.4:6; Col.2:16-17).

Our Lord's teachings during the first advent contained in the four gospels constitute the bridge between the Old and the New. There is no truth in the Old which is not found in or is inconsistent with anything in the New, and the gospels hold fast to both (Matt.13:52). The virtue of the New, in company with the gospels, is that it reveals mysteries only hinted at before – and explains the entirety of the truth of the Old. Without the New Testament, it would be impossible to put the Old into proper perspective, and in particular, it would be impossible to understand the proper role of the Old Covenant now that the New Covenant has replaced it. Jesus Christ is the key to this change, and the New Testament, penned only through the inspiration of His Spirit, explains every aspect of the change and all of its ramifications, of which one of prime importance is the absolute necessity to leave the Law and the temple and its rites behind as matters of faith and practice (2Cor.3:6).

Not that there are not wonderful and necessary things contained in every part of the Old Testament. Indeed there certainly are. But it has to be used properly (1Tim.1:8). Failing to understand the transition from the dispensation of Israel to the dispensation of the Church, or being unwilling to forsake Law for grace (e.g., "for they say, 'The old is better' "), is placing a new patch on an old garment and pouring new wine into old skins. Doing that ruins both. Spiritual growth and progress in this dispensation has to be a matter of grace in the embracing of the New Covenant and in leaving the Old behind. And the New Testament was the final brick in the new structure of the worldwide Church Age system that would make it possible for believers to learn the truth and to grow up to spiritual maturity independent of any keeping of the Law or looking to the past.

(11) Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (12) in order to prepare all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be built up, (13) until we all reach that unifying [goal] of belief in and full-knowledge of the Son of God, that each of us might be a perfect person, that is, that we might attain to that standard of maturity of the fullness of Christ; (14) that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, (15) but rather that we may, by embracing the truth in love, grow up in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. (16) In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love.

Ephesians 4:11-16

The apostles (and a few men closely associated with them and their ministries) were given this most blessed of all tasks of completing the canon of the Word of God. But it would not happen overnight. The first Pentecost of the Church Age took place in 33 A.D., but it would be nearly two decades before the first book of the New Testament, the book of Matthew, was written, and nearly another two decades after that before the last book of the New Testament, the book of Revelation, was written. As the need grew for new converts to know more about our Lord's earthly ministry, the Spirit inspired the creation of the gospels; as the need grew for the various congregations around the Mediterranean world to have questions answered, controversies solved, and abuses corrected, the Spirit inspired the epistles, and when these prior two groups of books had been written, the Spirit inspired the culmination of the New Testament, the book of Revelation, literally "the revealing of Jesus Christ", to complete the new revelation by bringing together and filling in the as yet unknown blank spots in the teaching to that point of the events of the end times and of our Lord's return and the glories thereafter.

Speaking of need, certainly all these books are needful for all Christians who are determined to do what our Lord would have us to do, namely, to grow up to spiritual maturity. In the passage quoted above (Eph.4:11-16), we see that this spiritual growth requires men with special teaching gifts: "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors-and-teachers". But while the first two categories of men received doctrinal truth directly from the Holy Spirit, after the Spirit ceased to give such

special gifts those who followed would need to have the completed New Testament. Outside of the natural revelation which is obvious from the world God has created (Rom.1:18-21), the Bible is now the sole source of divine truth. No one is currently receiving any sort of independent communications from the Lord. God's entire message for us is present only in scripture, so that the importance of the apostles' completion of the canon can never be underestimated.

Acts is a special book apart, the only truly historical book in the New Testament (the gospels center on the teaching of our Lord whose words are most certainly pre- and proscriptive), and as we have already seen in detail, the transitional period it charts was unique and required many equally unique and miraculous means of support and direction from the Spirit in order to accomplish. Not least of these was the provision of special spiritual gifts to the new congregations designed to bridge the gap until the New Testament was completed (and until sufficient teachers had been able to prepare to teach it). Not only apostleship and prophecy but also tongues (only in concert with the gift of interpretation of tongues, however), along with wisdom, knowledge and faith (in terms of special gifts – all believers may possess wisdom, knowledge and faith, but these gifts were unique in dispensing the quality named)³⁵, enabled these nascent congregations to grow in all truth in spite of having, at least in the early days, no New Testament at all, and no resident teachers who had adequately prepared to teach. It is a wonder and a blessing for us to have today some of the very instructions and teaching sent to some of these earliest congregations by just such specially gifted men whose words were inspired by the Holy Spirit and preserved as part of the eternal canon of the scripture for our benefit.

All scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for admonishing, for correcting, and for training in righteousness.
2nd Timothy 3:16

For the Word of God is living and powerful; it is sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even to the point of being able to divide the spirit from its earthly life and the marrow from its bones; it acts as a judge of our heart's intentions and emotions.
Hebrews 4:12

While the book of Acts is primarily descriptive and for the most part neither proscriptive nor prescriptive, the New Testament epistles are both, and constitute, along with the gospels, the treasury of Church Age teaching which reveals fully the mystery of Christ and His Church. The New Testament, therefore, is the capstone placed by the Holy Spirit on the transition from the Age of Israel to the Age of the Church. Once completed, the New Testament made clear all of the transitional issues discussed above, everything we see the nascent Church Age believers, apostles included, struggling with. The inclusion of the gentiles, the end of the Law, the shift from a national focus to a worldwide community of local churches – and indeed all of the ramifications of one Church being one with Christ and empowered and gifted by the Holy Spirit – are explained and taught in the New Testament. Rather than contradicting these teachings, the book

³⁵ See BB 5: Pneumatology, section II.B.3.d.1.c, "Temporary Gifts".

of Acts explains "how we got here", making it all the more unsatisfactory to use that book to overturn the clear teachings of the New Testament as a whole.

(8) Love never falls [into inactivity]. But whether [we are talking about gifts of] prophecy, they will cease, or about [gifts of] tongues, they will come to a stop, or [about the gift of] knowledge, it will be done away with. (9) For when we exercise the gift of knowledge, its results are only partial. And when we exercise the gift of prophecy, its results are only partial. (10) But when *what is complete* shall have come on the scene (i.e., the completed Bible available to a mature Church), *all partial measures* shall be done away with (because of the truth available in the New Testament without these temporary means).

1st Corinthians 13:8-10

With these words, the apostle Paul assures us that the "perfect", the "complete" revelation of God (the word *telos* in verse ten here encompasses both ideas), is soon to arrive. This passage, this book, is of course part of the canon of scripture, but at time of writing the New Testament, though underway, was not even half complete. For that reason, the temporary gifts Paul names above (along with all other temporary gifts designed by God to bridge the gap until such time as there was a completed New Testament and sufficient and sufficiently prepared teachers to teach its truths) would soon cease to be distributed by the Holy Spirit. These temporary gifts, apostleship, prophecy, and tongues coupled with the interpretation of tongues in particular, were essential during this time of transition. But after the transition from the Age of Israel to the Age of the Church had been completed, like the rituals and rites of the temple and the Law, the purpose for these temporary gifts had been accomplished (Col.2:16-17). Had the Spirit continued to give them, they would have been a distraction from the primary purpose of the local assembly, namely, the teaching of the Word of God by a prepared teacher from the Bible, the entire canon of scriptures. This point can be seen clearly enough from the distraction posed by individuals and groups who falsely claim to have such gifts today – just as those who today insist on Law-keeping likewise only put stumbling blocks in the way of spiritual growth.

C. The Future of the Church Universal

The Church Age is the mystery age (Eph.3:4-6; cf. Eph.3:8-9; Col.1:26-7). While foreshadowed in the Old Testament – for example in the seven days of re-creation (wherein each day represents a thousand years; cf. Ps.90:4; 2Pet.3:8)³⁶, in the Jewish ceremonial calendar (where the gaps between the festivals represent periods of time)³⁷, in the six branches of the menorah or lampstand in the tabernacle (which represents Christ's Body with the six branches likewise representing the six millennial days of history wherein His Body the Church is formed; Ex.25:31-

³⁶ See SR 5, section II.7, "The Seven Days of Human History".

³⁷ See SR, section II.8.c, "The Jewish Ceremonial Calendar".

40)³⁸, and in certain passages of scripture (such as those which foreshadow two advents of the Messiah; Is.53:1ff.; 1Pet.1:11; cf. also Hos.6:2) – there is no prior prophecy therein for any event or events taking place during the two millennial days of the Church Age. The one notable exception to this (though not actually an exception because trends rather than specific events are predicted) are the seven churches of Revelation chapters two and three. Covered in part 2A of the *Coming Tribulation* series, these churches represent the major trends of the seven eras of the Church Age which followed the time of the apostles and the time of transition studied above. The reader is directed to the study referenced for the details. Suffice it to say here that what is perhaps most pertinent for our purposes is that we find ourselves today on the cusp of the Tribulation in the last days of the era of Laodicea, the time of lukewarmness regarding the truth of the Word of God. Once this era ends, and once the one third of the Church destined for it survives to see our Lord return, from that time forward the future of the Church of Jesus Christ is nothing but glorious.³⁹ These matters have been exhaustively treated elsewhere (in the *Coming Tribulation* series); what follows here is a summary.

1. The Resurrection of the Church⁴⁰

(29) Immediately ***following the tribulation*** of those days, the sun will grow dark and the moon will not give out its light, and the stars will fall from heaven and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. (30) And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven. And then all the tribes of the earth will mourn and will see the Son of Man coming in command of the clouds of heaven (i.e., the heavenly hosts) with power and much glory. (31) And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet, and He will gather together His elect from the four winds from one end of the heavens to the other.
Matthew 24:29-31 (Mk.13:24-27)

(50) But I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit ***the kingdom*** of God (i.e., live in eternity with the Lord), nor can corruption inherit incorruption (i.e., we need the resurrection to live forever). (51) Behold, I tell you a mystery: not all of us will fall asleep, but all of us will be changed (52) in [that] moment of time, in the blink of an eye, at the final trumpet blast. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will rise incorruptible, and we too (i.e., believers still alive) will be changed [at that time (i.e., the Lord's Second Advent return)].
1st Corinthians 15:50-52

³⁸ For the symbolism, see SR 1, section II.5.b, "The Illustration of the Tabernacle", and CT 2B, "The Earthly Tabernacle and Temple as a Type of the Heavenly Temple".

³⁹ The martyrdom of one third of the Church is covered in CT 4, section VII, "The Great Persecution"; the falling away of one third of the Church is covered in CT 3A, section II, "The Great Apostasy".

⁴⁰ See CT 5, section V, "The Resurrection of the Lamb's Bride".

(15) For we tell you this by the Lord's own Word, that we who are alive and remain until *the coming* of the Lord (Gk. *parousia*; i.e., the Second Advent which brings the Great Tribulation to a close) will not precede those who have fallen asleep. (16) For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout of command, with the archangel's blast on the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first (in resurrection), (17) then we who are alive and remain will be snatched up together with them in clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and in this way we shall always be with the Lord.

1st Thessalonians 4:15-17

And *His armies* (i.e., elect angels and the Church once the mustering of the resurrection is complete) were following Him in the sky [mounted] on white horses, [and] clad in linen white and pure (cf. Rev.19:8).

Revelation 19:14

The time of the resurrection is, as these passages make incontrovertibly clear, the second advent of Jesus Christ. In the first passage, the resurrection is said to follow the Tribulation. In the second passage, the resurrection is said to be necessary because the kingdom – brought in by our Lord at the second advent – cannot be enjoyed/inherited without it. In the third passage, we see that the resurrection follows Christ's return (His *parousia* which always refers to the second advent in such passages). And in the fourth passage, we see the "hosts", of which the Church (the "wife" who has just now "made herself ready": Rev.19:7) is an integral part, mustering in the sky above the earth before our Lord just prior to Armageddon.

2. The Reward of the Church⁴¹

(10) But you, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you also belittle your brother? For we will all stand before *God's tribunal* (11) as it is written: "As I live", says the Lord, "every knee will bow to Me, and every tongue will praise God" (Is.45:23). (12) So then each of us will give an account concerning himself to God.

Romans 14:10-12

(10) According to the grace of God given to me like a wise architect I have laid down a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each one take care how he builds upon it. (11) For no one can lay another foundation except the One that has been laid down: Jesus Christ. (12) And if someone builds upon his foundation with gold, silver, and precious stones, [or] with wood, hay, and stubble, (13) [in either case] his work will be made manifest [as to its true quality], for the Day [of judgment] will make it clear [for what it truly is], because it will be revealed (lit., uncovered) with fire. And the fire will evaluate (lit., "assay") the work of each person as to what its [true] quality is. (14) If anyone's work which he has built [on his foundation of faith in Christ] remains (i.e., is not burnt away by the fiery evaluation), he will receive a reward [for it]. (15) If anyone's work

⁴¹ See CT 6, section I.7, "The Judgment and Reward of the Church".

is burnt up, he will suffer the loss [of any potential reward for it], but he himself will be saved – but in this way [just described] as through fire [which evaluated his false works as worthless and burnt them up].

1st Corinthians 3:10-15

For we must all stand before *Christ's tribunal*, so that each of us may receive recompense for what he has accomplished through this body, whether it be good or worthless.

2nd Corinthians 5:10

The final judgment to occur before the glorious Wedding Supper of the Lamb inaugurates our Lord's thousand year rule of blessing beyond imagination is the judgment and rewarding of the Church.⁴² All members of Christ's Church from Eden to the second advent, recently resurrected, will at this time be judged by our Lord Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. Our earthly lives – every free will decision we made – will be evaluated and we will receive from the Lord reward or rebuke, "according to what we have done, whether good or bad" (2Cor.5:10). Whatever embarrassment we may feel at that time for the bad we have done (or the good we have failed to do) will be the end of it – and everything not rewardable will be burned up in the presence of the Lord and the rest of the Church (1Cor.3:15). While this is a fearsome prospect (2Cor.5:11), we may be sure that not a single member of the Body will be without regrets about their personal bonfire, no matter how small – all the more reason to make a point from this point forward to avoid everything and anything displeasing to the Lord. At this same judgment, we will be rewarded by the Lord for the good things we have done while "in the body", and not the smallest rewardable act will fail to receive its proper recompense (Matt.10:42). That being the case, we all ought to make it our highest priority in this life to do what it is the Lord wants us to do, learning about Him, walking with Him, and serving Him better and better, more and more, day by day – for on *that* day we will not regret a single part of the reward we receive from Him and the "well done!" we dearly desire from Him (Matt.25:21; 25:23; Lk.19:17), no matter how difficult the struggle of spiritual growth, progress and production may seem here and now.

Even though there is much we cannot really know and appreciate this side of the resurrection about the eternal rewards the Church will receive when evaluated by our dear Lord on His return, what scripture does allow us to say will be found at the link referenced at the head of this section. Suffice it to say here that our rank in the eternal structure of the Church depends upon and will be assigned to us by the Lord according to our performance in this life. Scripture promises an ascending scale of eternal crowns – military decorations⁴³ and awards of merit in the ancient world – for achieving spiritual growth, passing the tests that follow spiritual maturity, and fulfilling the life-ministry to which we have been individually called (the crowns of righteousness, life and glory respectively). There are also indications that our eternal residence in the New Jerusalem will likewise correspond to our earthly performance for the Lord. No doubt

⁴² See CT 6, section I, "The Second Advent Judgments".

⁴³ Part of the "spoils" of Christ's victory given to the Church (Is.53:12; cf. Eph.4:7-8).

there are many other distinctions built into the rewards received at the judgment seat of Christ (as the parables of the minas and talents indicate in Lk.19:11-27 and Matt.25:14-30 respectively).

3. The Role of the Church in Christ's Millennial Rule

One reward that will be immediately enjoyed is the sharing of Christ's millennial reign, wherein the Church will administer our Lord's Kingdom, with higher ranking believers placed in higher positions of authority in so doing (1Cor.6:3; 2Tim.2:12; Rev.1:6; 2:26-27; 3:21; 20:4-6). Let us make every effort therefore to do our best to ensure that our time before our Lord's *bema* is a joyous one for us and for Him.

(26) "And to the one who wins the victory and gives heed to My works until the end, I will give to him authority over the nations. (27) And he will shepherd them with an iron rod and crush them like vessels of clay, (28) just as I have received [the authority] from My Father."

Revelation 2:26-28a

Before we take up our millennial offices, however, the entire Church newly resurrected and newly rewarded will convene in Jerusalem for the most amazing and wonderful celebration in all of history: the Wedding Supper of the Lamb.

(6) On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines. (7) On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; (8) he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken. (9) In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

Isaiah 25:6-9 NIV (cf. Matt.8:11-12; 22:1-14; 25:1-13; Lk.13:29; 14:16-24)

4. The New Jerusalem⁴⁴

(1) "Do not let your heart be troubled. You believe in God [the Father] – believe also in Me. (2) There are many rooms in my Father's house. If there were not, I would have told you. For I am going in order to prepare a place for you. (3) And if I go and prepare a place for you, I shall come again and take you to Myself, so that where I am, you may be also." John 14:1-3

(9) Then one of the seven angels who have the seven bowls filled with the seven final plagues came [up to me], and he spoke with me, saying, "Come. I will show you the Bride, the Lamb's wife". (10) Then he carried me in the Spirit to a mountain, great and

⁴⁴ See CT 6, section VII, "New Jerusalem and the Eternal state".

high, and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, (11) and [it shone] with the glory of God. It was radiant like an extremely precious gemstone, like a [purple] jasper stone, [only] translucent like crystal. (12) It had a wall, great and high with twelve gates, and at the gates were twelve angels. Names were written on [each of] the gates which are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. (13) Three gates faced east; three gates faced north; three gates faced west; and three gates faced south. (14) And the city wall had twelve foundations, and on [the twelve foundations] were [written] the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (15) And the [angel] who was speaking with me had a golden measuring rod [which he used] to measure the city [along with] its gates and its wall. (16) The city was square in its design with its length equal to its width. And he measured the city with his [golden measuring] rod, and [it came] to 12,000 stadia (i.e., approx. 1590 miles): its length and its width and its height were precisely the same. (17) He then measured the [city's] rim, 144 cubits (i.e., approx. 84 yards) in human measurement which is the same [here] as the angelic standard. (18) The wall of [the city] was composed of [purple] jasper, and the city [itself] of pure gold [which was] transparent like crystal.

Revelation 21:9-18

The ultimate "place" our Lord has prepared for us is the New Jerusalem, the focal point of the new heavens and the new earth which God will create anew at the end of human history (Ps.102:25-26; Is.65:17; 66:22; 2Pet.3:13; Rev.21:1). The beauties and the glories of New Jerusalem, while foreshadowed in the last two chapters of the book of Revelation, can only be dimly imagined at present – just as is true of the resurrection body and our eternal rewards. But we can say for certain that this will be our eternal home since the angel tells John, that the city itself is "the Bride, the Lamb's wife" (Rev.21:9) – meaning that this is the Bride's eternal home.

(9) After this I looked and, behold, [there was] a huge multitude which no one was able to number from every nation and tribe and people and tongue standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes and with palm branches in their hands. (10) And they were shouting in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God, the One who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!" (11) And all the angels had taken their stand around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures. And they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, (12) saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might belong to our God forever and ever! Amen!"

Revelation 7:9-12

The above takes place during the Tribulation and before the resurrection, but it seems fair to say on the basis of the above that at least part of our eternity in the New Jerusalem will consist of assembling as a united Church before Father and Son, worshipping them in perfect holiness and in perfect unity, glorying in them and in our oneness as a Church belonging to the Head of the Church, our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

(4) Blessed are those [destined to] dwell in Your house. They will praise you forever.

(5) Blessed is everyone whose strength is in You. Their hearts are set on the highways [of pilgrimage to Zion]. (6) As they pass through the [dry] valley of Bachah (i.e., the wilderness of life), they make it a place of springs. Even the early rains enwrap it with [their] blessings. (7) They go from strength to strength, until they appear before God in Zion.

Psalm 84:4-7

For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
Than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

Psalm 84:10 NKJV

II. The Local Church

A. The Assembly of the Local Church

The reason for having local churches is similar to the reason that Jews of the diaspora had synagogues. In the analogy, all Jews were supposed to assemble in Jerusalem yearly for the three major festivals (the feasts of Weeks, Unleavened Bread, and Tabernacles). For the Church Age, by way of sharpest contrast, however, there is no universal assembly or assembly point. The first time the entire Church will assemble is at the resurrection when the trumpet of assembly sounds and we all rise "to meet the Lord in the air" (1Thes.4:16-17; cf. Matt.24:29-32; 1Cor.15:50-52; Rev.19:14). Therefore whatever teaching of the truth believers in the Church Age receive must come *not* from a mass assembly (where rituals and sacrifices are the dominant means of teaching), but from local assemblies spread throughout the world which are (biblically, at any rate) completely devoid of rituals and sacrifices (the communion ceremony being the sole legitimate exception). Much of importance can be gleaned from this single passage (translated twice here, the second time to emphasize its intended application to *local* churches):

[I write these things to you so that] if I am delayed you may know how [believers] ought to comport themselves in a house of God which is a church (or "an assembly") of the living God, [that is] a pillar and support for the truth.

1st Timothy 3:15

(14) I am writing these things to you, expecting to come to you very shortly. (15) But [I am giving you these instructions] so that in case I am delayed you may know how a person must comport himself in A "house of God" – which is AN assembly of the living God, A pillar and A support of THE truth.

1st Timothy 3:14-15

The word for the local church/assembly here is the same word we have been studying since the beginning, *ekklessia*, and it is identical in form to the word to which it corresponds, namely, the universal Church with a capital "C". But while, biblically speaking, we have small 'c' local churches which comprise the militant portion of the large "C" Church of Jesus Christ (that is to

say, those believers who are on earth "fighting the fight" at present), there is no "middle c" of any kind in the Bible. Scripture gives us no justification for the formation of denominations.

One can easily understand how such supra-church organizations develop. There is a natural desire for believers in any given church to communicate and cooperate with other churches which share the same point of view on important issues and the same enthusiasms – and there is certainly nothing wrong with that. Indeed, the unity of believers is a key theme throughout the Bible and in the epistles in particular (Rom.15:5; 1Cor.1:10; 2Cor.13:11; Eph.4:3; Phil.2:2-4; Col.3:14; 1Pet.3:8-9; see section II.C.3.f below). But genuine Christian unity is based upon the mutual acceptance and embracing of the truth of the Word of God.

Ideally, a believer could walk into any church and find the same things being taught and the same principles being abided by anywhere in the world. Instead of a march toward an ever greater understanding of the truth, however, with some notable exceptions much of the history of the church-visible has consisted of a wandering away from the true center of the Word into esoteric traditionalism bearing in all too many cases little relation whatsoever to the truth.

Denominationalism has furthered that trend, in spite of the fact that in many instances denominations have been set up with the purpose of combating it. That is because codifying rules and reducing a group's necessarily limited understanding of the truth to creedal statements is inherently stultifying and mortifying when it comes to spiritual growth. So while a brand new denomination may possibly be a reflection of a growing group of believers who are enthusiastic for the truth of the Word, institutionalizing things not only of necessity puts a halt to any further development (because things have now been set in stone), but also always results in the death of growth and genuine desire for the truth in the generations that follow (because the enthusiasm for the actual truth of the Word has now been replaced by a veneration of tradition).

Truth, therefore, is the true unifier, and lack of respect for the truth is what genuinely divides – and should divide – those who are intent on following Jesus Christ from those who are not (2Tim.3:1-5; 2Jn.1:8-11; cf. 1Cor.5:11). For there is no sharper sword than the truth (Eph.6:17; Heb.4:12).

(34) "Do not think that I have come to hurl peace upon the earth. I have not come to hurl peace upon the earth but a sword (of divisiveness). (35) For I have come to divide . . . 'a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. (36) A man's enemies will be the members of his own household'. (37) Whoever loves his father or mother above Me is not worthy of Me, and whoever loves his son or daughter above Me is not worthy of Me. (38) And whoever does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. (39) Whoever has found his life will lose it, and the one who has lost his life for My sake will find it."

Matthew 10:34-39

When it comes to Christian assembly then, we need to pay attention to the words of Paul at 1st Timothy 3:14-15 above: it is the local church which is a house of God, an assembly of the living God, and a pillar and support of the truth. Assembly is all about the truth, and the local church is

the place ordained by God to carry the truth on its shoulders. That is its purpose, according to the Word of God. When Christians come together, therefore, and wherever they come together, we have "a church", believers gathering in the Name of the Lord (Matt.18:20), for the sake of the truth: learning it, proclaiming it, spreading it, preserving it.

(24) And let us give careful attention to one another[*'s ministries*] as motivation for [our own] love and good works, (25) not abandoning your mutual assembling as some have made it their practice to do [and which makes this impossible], but rather encouraging each other [to persevere in this work of the Lord], and doing so to an ever greater degree to the extent that you see the day [of the Lord] drawing [ever] closer.

Hebrews 10:24-25

This passage is often quoted but rarely are its details appreciated. Many use these verses today to proclaim the importance of assembly, little noticing that it is the purpose of assembly which is important, not the assembly itself.

(12) "When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? (13) Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. (14) Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them."

Isaiah 1:12-14 NIV

"I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me."

Amos 5:21 NIV

"Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD Almighty, "and I will accept no offering from your hands."

Malachi 1:10 NIV

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.

1st Corinthians 11:17 NIV

If assembly for its own sake were of value, scripture would have no need of the passages above. The recipients of Hebrews *were* assembling, but at the wrong place (the temple) and for the wrong reasons (sentimentality and a desire to avoid persecution). Hebrews 10:24-25 is given by Paul to the Jerusalem church in the context of those believers melting back into Judaism precisely because they were neglecting the study of the Word of truth, the number one purpose of Christian assembly. Thus Hebrews 10:24-25 in fact makes it clear that Christian assembly is not to be a pointless exercise, but is meant specifically for the purpose of mutual encouragement and of mutual ministry in the truth and through the truth – not meeting for its own sake. In other words, mutual edification is the reason for assembly, through encouragement, through ministry,

through the reading and through the teaching of the Word of God (the primary ministry of the local church); assembly, *proper* assembly, makes such edification possible when the Word is at the center of all that is done. And edification is all about the truth, for it is only through the truth of the Word of God that we are built up spiritually, that we are edified through spiritual growth. The accomplishment of this purpose of spiritual growth is why we Christians are to assemble, pure and simple. All other motivations and all other purposes are wide of the mark, and assembly without edification does "more harm than good" (1Cor.11:17; cf. Acts 20:32; Rom.14:19; 1Cor.8:1; 10:23; 14:3-5; 14:17; 2Cor.10:8; 12:19; 13:10; Eph.4:29; Col.2:6-7; 2:18-19; 1Thess.5:11; 1Pet.2:4-6; Jude 1:20-21).

In the same way you also, since you are [so] desirous of spiritual gifts, seek that you may abound [in them] for the purpose of the edification of the Church.

1st Corinthians 14:12

Let all these things (i.e., the functioning of the various spiritual gifts) be done for the purpose of edification.

1st Corinthians 14:26b

(15) . . . but rather that we may, by *embracing the truth* in love, *grow up* in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. (16) In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth *for the building up of itself* in love.

Ephesians 4:15-16

If instead of assembling with the purpose of being edified through the teaching of the Word of God, we remain satisfied with what has become traditional "church", whether composed of comfortable and predictable rituals and modes of "worship" or new, exciting and hyper-emotional displays and various spectacles (yet lacking in both extremes any serious substance or possibility of genuine edification), then we are exactly where the Jerusalem church was when Paul upbraided them at Hebrews 10:24-25: we are assembling, but in the wrong places and for the wrong reasons, doing ourselves "more harm than good" (1Cor.11:17). Thus in quoting that passage to berate and shame believers who are unwilling to participate in such superficiality, those who do so have in fact turned it on its head.

(10) "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (11) Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. (12) Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Matthew 5:10-12 NKJV

(22) "Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. (23) Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets."

Luke 6:22-23 NKJV

(12) Therefore Jesus too, in order that He might sanctify the people through His own blood (i.e., His death on the cross), suffered outside the gate (i.e., separated from fellowship). (13) So then let us go out to Him outside of the camp (i.e., likewise choosing God over the world), bearing His reproach. (14) For we do not have here [on earth] a city which [is meant to be] lasting; rather we are eagerly looking forward to the city that is destined [to come] (i.e., the New Jerusalem).

Hebrews 13:12-14

Believers today who choose pleasing the Lord and pursuing the truth are often looked down upon by those who have little interest in either but who do "worship" in conventional ways. The son of the freewoman has always been persecuted by the son of the slave woman (Gal.4:21-31). And it is understandable because by doing things the right way we call attention to the essential defectiveness of those who are doing things the wrong way.

(37) "And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. (38) No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. (39) And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, 'The old is better.' "

Luke 5:37-39 NIV

Very little of what has come to be accepted as "church" nowadays occurred during apostolic times (or anywhere in scripture). The apostolic church as evidenced by the book of Acts and by the New Testament epistles was apparently a very spare thing. We have no indication that, while the apostles were still in charge, anyone ever built a church building, or that anyone ever defined a local church in terms of official "membership", or that any church ever acquired any property whatsoever, or that there was ever a single "choir", or committee, or order of service, or creedal statement or any of the countless other things which are so recognizable by Christians today as the "church" experience. What we have instead are believers, meeting in the homes of other believers or some other non-dedicated space, sometimes regularly so (Acts 19:9; Rom.16:5; 1Cor.16:19; Philem.1:2). Without buildings to service, and anthems to practice, and rituals to perform, what did these churches do? They dedicated themselves to the Word of God.

Until I (i.e., Paul) come, devote yourself to [public] reading [of the scriptures], to encouragement, to teaching [the Word].

1st Timothy 4:13

Paul's instructions to Timothy are very clear. Nothing is said about what would traditionally be considered "worship" or any of the other multifarious things churches today occupy themselves with. Timothy was to exert himself for the sake of his congregation's edification – through the ministering of the Word of God. That same focus is certainly possible today as well, even if it is rarely observed and hard to find. The main differences between apostolic days and our present day are the lack of any further apostolic oversight (though this is essentially what all

denominations pretend to supply), and the absence today of that special class of spiritual gifts designed to bridge the gap until the canon had been completed and distributed and sufficient gifted men trained in the Word so as to be able to do what the prepared-by-Paul-personally Timothy, a rare commodity at that time, was commanded to do (though many today seek to falsely claim their revival).

What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.

1st Corinthians 14:26

The "hymn" above is, literally, a Psalm, and words not music are meant. In the absence of a teacher, prophecy and like gifts of edification (studied above) took up the slack, and Paul is here and in the entire chapter in which this verse occurs, laying down the ground rules to prevent abuse. When the apostolic era came to an end, however, so did these special gifts, and the early church resolved to be what the Bible teaches it should be today: a group of Christians who come together to grow from the Word, a prepared pastor-teacher to teach them, and a bare minimum of flexible, common-sense administration to oversee and to facilitate this process.

Scripture is (to the lights of some) surprisingly light on details when it comes to "church organization". But that makes eminent sense once one realizes that the objective is the key: edification of those who gather; therefore flexibility in the employment of the means of furthering this objective is beneficial to achieving it. Making the form dominant of necessity militates against the process. But that is precisely what has happened in almost all "churches" today, where we find rigidity in structure, in organization, in creedal positions (regardless of their relationship to the truth), in format of "worship" and in most other things as well. That is true even in the case in newer denominations and movements such as the Messianics and the Charismatics, and in new "mega-churches" as well. They have laid out in detail what they say they believe and how things should be done, and in so doing going far beyond anything in the Bible (and in violation of scriptural strictures in many cases; e.g., water-baptism; tithing; membership; etc.).

The one thing consistently lacking almost universally in almost all churches and denominations today is the most important thing of all: the teaching of the Word of God. Hyper-organization, it seems, has crushed the true life out of the present day local churches – which is no doubt precisely why the scriptures say so little about the issue. If there is no denomination, there is no need for a creed. If there is no dedicated building or collectively owned property, there is no need for membership or for putting pressure on those who come to join and to give. If there is no need to attract more and more members and put more and more emphasis on money (to fulfill planned and present expansion), then there is likewise no need to pander to those who are not interested in the teaching of the Word of God, whether via the ritual route or the emotional excitement route. In the absence of all that is false, all that is needed for believers desirous of following Jesus Christ through the truth are, gifted, prepared men to teach them, and a place or means of doing so. That may well look absolutely nothing like what people today think of as a "church",

but it would indeed be an *ekklesia*, "a house of God, an assembly of the living God, a pillar and a support of the truth" (1Tim.3:15). It would be a church . . . in the Lord's eyes. And His is the only opinion that counts.

What a local church *should* do:

~ Assemble regularly for the purpose of edification through the Word (Heb.10:24-25). This is provided nowadays primarily through the teaching of the pastor-teacher. The other edification gifts, such as those referenced in Hebrews 10:24-25, have now ceased (1Cor.13:8-10). Though Sunday is occasionally mentioned in the New Testament, no specific day for meeting is mandated by scripture (cf. Acts 20:7; 1Cor.16:2; Rev.1:10).

~ Provide a place to meet (Acts 19:9; Rom.16:5; 1Cor.16:19; Phil.1:2). No local church owned building is ever mentioned in scripture. A "church" is composed of the believers who gather, wherever they gather. "Meeting" or "assembly" is also to be viewed from the point of view of its purpose of edification, the truly important thing (rather than the place/building or mere assembly for its own sake, as we have seen). Paul commends the reading of his letters (Col.4:16 with Col. 2:1; 1Thes.5:27; 2Thes.2:15; cf. the book of Romans written to a congregation he had not yet visited) – which constitutes teaching, even though he was not personally present. Contemporary equivalents could be audio tapes or files, video presentations or written material, whether on the internet or not.

~ Have a bare-bones system of organization (1Tim.3:1-15; covered in section II.C.1 below). The purpose of the organization, to facilitate spiritual growth, is as with all other issues here what is important. Given the inherent problem with bureaucracies, less is always better than more. Scripture gives qualifications for elders and deacons but does not mandate their appointment nor suggest their number nor designate their duties. Church polity – according to the Bible – is left flexible so as to be able to adapt to actual needs. Organizing, appointing officers, mandating duties and the like where there is no genuine need is putting things exactly backwards and will always produce negative consequences.

~ Teach the Word of God (Jn.21:17; 1Cor.14:12; 14:26; Eph.4:15-16; 2Tim.4:2; cf. 2Tim.2:15; Heb.4:12). The prior three points have supporting this primary function of the local church as their goal. It is very dangerous for any group ever to lose sight of this critical truth.

What a local church *may* do:

~ Music. In the Old Testament, there were ritualized musical performances and choirs (e.g., 1Chron.9:33). However, this was under the Law and in concert with the temple worship and rites. There are no choirs in the New Testament. Nor are there any indications that music formed any part of the assembly of local churches during the time of the apostles. The disciples are said to have "sung a hymn" on the way to the Mount of Olives after the last supper (Matt.26:30; Mk.14:26). So we would not want to say that music is forbidden. Paul in speaking of the proper

way to employ spiritual gifts says at 1st Corinthians 14:26 that "each has a psalm, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation", but he is talking about edification gifts which have since lapsed and have now been replaced by the teaching of a prepared pastor. The "psalm" is sometimes translated "hymn", but from the context it is very clear that this is referring to the words of a psalm that a gifted person will explain to edify the believers present – not to a musical presentation. In the heavenly worship described in the book of Revelation, the angels do indeed praise God in song (Rev.5:12; cf. Rev.5:9; 14:3; 15:3 also the martyrs and the 144,000), and this is seen also elsewhere in scripture (Lk.2:13-14; although the text here says "saying" not singing). What all such instances have in common is that these are cases of perfect praise and worship wherein the content is prepared by God Himself. That is significantly different from music – and more particularly lyrics – which have been invented by sinful human beings (whose spiritual status at the time of concoction may not even have been that of maturity). Most hymns and Christian music are flawed in terms of their doctrinal content and/or emphasis, and can often create false impressions, strongly so because of the emotional power of the music that accompanies the lyrics. Paul commends individual believers "making music" in their hearts (Eph.5:19; Col.3:16), but a careful study of the context will show that this is part and parcel of the Christian technique of focusing oneself on the Lord through directing one's thoughts, not the commendation of music per se (let alone, communal music). The best we can say, based upon the observations that music in the contemporary church-visible has come to dominate "church" to the near eradication of teaching the truth and that the music itself while no doubt entertaining is at best woefully insufficient in its presentation of issues of truth and sometimes outright dangerous, is that less is probably more for any local gathering of believers.

~ Praise, worship and testimony. Praising God is also something found in heavenly worship, and not always through music (e.g., Is.6:1-3; Rev.5:11-14). The problem for us is that we are not in the visible presence of the Lord and so cannot fall down at His feet or express our praise to Him directly as in the scriptural examples (e.g., Matt.28:9; Mk.5:22; Lk.17:16). In the New Testament, moreover, where the Lord is not personally present, "praising God" often follows some miracle done on behalf of the person offering praise or those witnessing it (Acts 3:8-9; 4:21; 10:46).

(46) 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, (47) praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 2:46-47 NIV

Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying?

1st Corinthians 14:6 NIV

The second passage here in particular makes it clear what is meant: the verbal expression of "thanksgiving" to God for His greatness, and our gratitude for what He has done and is doing (cf.

Acts 11:18; Acts 21:20). This is sometimes called "giving one's testimony" in evangelical churches today, but it should be noted that there is no biblical formula for how we are to verbally express our praise and gratitude to the Lord, nor need it (or possibly even should it) be boiled down to a brief resume of what we have experienced throughout our lives. Praise in scripture, in the Old Testament and the New, tends to be a spontaneous reaction to events. So while there is precedent for praising the Lord – other than in music – in group settings in both testaments, in scripture it is never ritualized.

~ Order of Worship. Teaching the Word of God is the reason for Christian assembly. A quick perusal of any "order of worship" in any major denomination or independent church will demonstrate very quickly that this sadly is not what takes up the main portion – or even a dominant portion – of the Sunday (or Saturday) "worship service". A typical list of what one finds would be a formal welcome (which nowadays often includes communal greeting), a series of prayers (often formalized), short scripture readings (often performed by members of the congregation who do not understand what they are reading; scripture gives this job to the pastor: 1Tim.4:13), communal readings, announcements, hymns and also anthems (performed by the choir), and, of course, a sermon. Even if sermons had something to do with Bible teaching (in fact, of course, traditionally they are rhetorical, emotional, and meant to entertain through many illustrations, humorous and emotive stories, and "relevancy" to daily life, or to motivate the congregation to do what the leadership wants, give more money, do more work, bring in more members), the small amount of time remaining after all of the other tasks have been seen to means that a person going to Sunday service diligently would require many years to even approach the point of spiritual maturity – assuming the sermons were actually teaching the Bible and nothing else (a most improbable assumption). It would not be wrong for a local church to have some predictable division of time if and when it was decided that Bible teaching would be "supplemented" by, e.g., some communal prayer and reading of scripture, and occasionally communion; but the danger of the traditional order of worship is that it virtually guarantees the elimination of Bible teaching and reversion to the norm of what one finds virtually everywhere in Laodicea today.

What a local church *should think twice* about doing:

~ Church Buildings. Apostolic era churches did make use of regular venues (meeting in the homes of church members and in Ephesus in a public space). But while dedicated buildings – synagogues – were employed by contemporaneous Jewish congregations, there is no mention in the New Testament of a single "church" of the sort one finds on nearly every other corner in this country. Scripture does not overtly prohibit the building or buying of a space dedicated to serve the local group of believers in question. However, there are many complications brought on by the decision to do so. The acquisition of property in any society where legalized property rights exist will mean that the believers so inclined will have much to consider. Who will own this new building and the land it stands on? If the answer is as one might expect, "the church as a whole", then "the church" will have to be legally defined. In other words, it will now be necessary to develop a system of formal membership. Rules will have to be written to provide for members

joining and departing the fellowship. More rules will be necessary in order to keep the congregation of members which owns the property on the right side of the law in all the various and sundry matters to which property owners must give their attention – especially in the case of a structure where numbers of people will be gathering regularly, some of whom will be members, others not. Insurance will need to be purchased. Plans will need to be made for keeping the building clean and presentable, and the physical plant operational. All of this (and many more things beside, as anyone who has ever been connected with the governance of a local church will realize full well), will require the commitment of a good deal of time and effort on the part of many dedicated members. And most of this will require money as well.

Now of course formally joining a group with legal obligations is not wrong; nor is committing oneself to protracted service to the organization joined; nor committing to sufficient monetary "giving" in order to do one's part to keep the operation afloat. However, none of these things, onerous and complicated and time-consuming as they tend to be, are directly productive of spiritual growth. Indeed, they will only contribute to spiritual growth in the case of believers who are already growing through exposure to the truth, who willingly sacrifice in order to provide the infrastructure for that growth to continue for themselves and others. But before we become too congratulatory of even this type of self-sacrifice, it would be good to consider that efforts of this sort are being made by well-meaning individuals in all manner of churches in every village and town in this country every day – yet in most cases without there being any significant teaching of the Word of God within these churches in fact (and so no spiritual growth whatsoever).

In a perhaps counter-intuitive way, giving people "something to do" often results in them "doing that" as a substitute for what they should be doing. That is to say, church buildings tend to become the object of effort rather than genuine growth through the taking in of the teaching of the Word of God, and thus tend to become the true object of worship and focus rather than our Lord and His truth. Once a building comes into the picture, once membership and a standardized form of procedure are adopted, the "system" tends to revolve around its own preservation and expansion. That means that more money, more volunteers, more space and property are necessary, and often come to be seen as the end itself. That is why a very large percentage of sermons one is likely to hear in traditional churches focus on giving and raising money, attracting new members, joining and volunteering, building and expanding what the church already has. Sometimes the trajectory is upward (as in new startups eager to expand), and sometimes downward (wherein a traditional church is trying to survive), but either way the focus is the same: *not* on teaching the Word of God.

In our era of Laodicea, dedicating oneself to spiritual growth and progress through the teaching of the truth is not fashionable. So any organized church, new or old, which wants to build and expand will have to adapt to customer demand. That means doing things "people want" and in the way people want. That means catering either to elaborate ritual or emotional excess or excitement and entertainment on the one hand; and on the other hand, it means avoiding associating with any teaching which might be off-putting. Since truth is divisive (e.g., Matt.10:34; cf. Eph.6:17; Heb.4:12), the best way to avoid offense is to avoid teaching anything

substantive at all. Many people come for the music and "fellowship" in any case, so these are excellent things to focus upon to achieve the goal of growth – not spiritual growth, but organizational growth; and the two are nearly polar opposites. This is the path of decay that going down the building road usually leads to. But what if there were never a building in the first place? As in scripture.

~ Membership and Membership Requirements. The Bible says nothing about membership requirements because it says nothing about membership. Believers are free to gather with other believers for as long as they wish and then to gather elsewhere for whatever reason. If the reason for assembly is a genuine love for the Word of God on the part of those gathering, and if the Word of God is actually being taught in any given fellowship in sufficient depth and substance to contribute to spiritual growth, that is a rare situation indeed. Such a condition will tend to attract truly dedicated Christians and weed out those who are not so, without any need for rule-making. There are exceptions such as we find in 1st Corinthians chapter five, and it is the province of the pastor and the other church leaders/elders to accelerate the process of departure in rare cases where an individual who gathers with the group is involved in overt gross sin or criminal activity absent repentance. That is a rare situation in any church which is teaching-centered and can be dealt with according to biblical principles by the leadership without resorting to extensive rule-making (see section II.C.1.g below). But if a church decides to incorporate in order to acquire a building, definitive, written rules for becoming a member, for termination of membership, and rules by which members must abide will be necessary.

~ Choir. Generally speaking, a choir will not be necessary if music consists only of occasional hymns (or is generally not present in a teaching-centered gathering). However, churches which aspire to their own buildings will probably need a choir since present day expectations of new attendees and potential members (necessary for an incorporated group holding property) will often be focused largely on the music and the "quality" thereof. Competition for bodies in our day within the ranks of those who care little about learning the truth of scripture is particularly fierce, especially given the rise of mega-churches which often have high production values in their musical presentations. On the other hand, a group of Christians focused on Bible teaching instead will find that there is very little genuine competition – but also very little demand here in Laodicea. Whether a group that puts teaching in first place can also attract enough interest to be sustainable in the traditional "church-building and membership" model is a dubious proposition.

~ Calling a Pastor. We will have much more to say about the office of pastor-teacher in the next section. It is clear, however, that any group which decides to formalize and occupy a church building is going to need a leader to direct and further the operation. That is why for all the variable terminology and multifarious systems of church governance in practical terms there is one man who is actually in charge in virtually any church building in the country (or one woman; see section II.C.3.e below). Realistically speaking, therefore, any group which wants to have its own building will need eventually if not initially, in addition to formal legal structure and membership, a full-time pastor. The most important consideration for any group contemplating this step is the need to support the man they choose to be their leader. All other offices in a

traditional church can be filled by members of the congregation volunteering and taking turns to provide whatever other administrative support may be needed. But people coming to a "church" certainly have the expectation that there will be a "pastor" present; that he will give a sermon on the day of meeting; that he will preside over their weddings and their funerals; that he will visit them occasionally, especially when in the hospital; that he will chair their committees, attend their church-related social functions, smooth over their disagreements, counsel and encourage them in their marital and other difficulties, oversee the Christian education of their children, and so many other things besides – not to mention providing the leadership, impetus, and attractiveness to grow their church to the next level and beyond. No matter what one may think of this system and these expectations, any man who is going to be required to attempt to meet them will need to be fully supported if he is to have a hope of doing so. But if there are no such aspirations, it may be possible to provide partial support (of which any genuine, Bible teaching pastor teacher is worthy and to which he is entitled) to offset the time and effort he is spending on feeding the congregation which might otherwise be spent in providing for his family. In the end, a pastor who is informally helped and who teaches without being responsible for all of the other laundry list of onerous tasks briefly alluded to above, will no doubt provide more genuine spiritual food to the church than the traditional pastor who is too loaded down with "traditional" duties to have the time and energy to do so (even if he has the inclination, preparation and gift; see section II.B below).

~ Fellowship and Outreach. For a small group of dedicated believers who meet together to take in the Word of God, fellowship among those who meet will be a natural thing, and to the extent that it extends beyond pleasantries at meetings will be unforced and voluntary. Likewise, extending invitations to those one meets who indicate responsiveness to the truth will also be a natural sort of thing to do. Since the motivation in such cases will only be for the salvation (if the person is an unbeliever) and spiritual growth of the ones invited, no particular damage or loss will be incurred by those who decline (except by those who fail to choose this "best part": Lk.10:42), nor felt (the offer was genuine and we have to allow others their free will).

For churches that aspire to constructing buildings and growing their membership, however, fellowship and outreach, rather than being natural results of a group of dedicated followers of Christ, are absolutely critical, and nearly ends in and of themselves. That is, on the one hand, because while a Christian who wants to grow is concerned with teaching, most Laodicean Christians (both genuine believers and traditionalist unbelievers) look to "church" for its social aspects, and therefore any church which does not provide venues and opportunities for building social relationships with other members of the church will be at a severe disadvantage in the numbers competition. Not only that, but the more inventive and attractive and effective a given church is in pairing up both singles and couples with others in enjoyable and desirable social relationships, the more successful it will be as a church – by the metrics of attendance, membership, fame, influence, and, importantly for this model, the bringing in of monetary contributions.

On the other hand, without effective outreach of one sort or another – without effective

advertising – there will be few who will buy this product. For that reason, all such successful churches make great efforts to mobilize their members to perform aggressive outreach. Individuals reaching out to other individuals, especially to those with whom they already have some relationship, is one of the most productive methods for spreading the word and inducing others to attend. Of course, if the product is defective (in the eyes of the buyer), well, as the old saying goes, nothing kills a bad product quicker than effective advertising: once people are induced to try it but don't like it, they will never try it again.

So in terms of the traditional growth model, it is important to have the product "ready to go" for those who are persuaded to try it. The fellowship must be warm (so instead of people naturally associating merely with those with whom they share common interests, current members will need to go the extra mile to "be friends" with those who do come for the first time). The musical program will have to be "good" (whether that means innovative, or professional, or highly emotional, or satisfyingly traditional depends on the marketing strategy: but the competition here is fierce, especially in the mega-church era, and music, other than fellowship, is one of the prime values customers consider). The physical plant will have to be attractive (special buildings – and excessively large buildings – often go a long way towards accomplishing the numbers objective: people, especially in Laodicea, are often more likely to gravitate to something remarkably large, and all the more so if the building is unique and suitably impressive, so that overreaching on this score is a reasonable risk to take). And also very importantly the pastor will also have to be "good". That is to, the man will have to inspire and entertain with his rhetoric and with his performance in a way that impresses the new attendees and leaves them hungry for more (the length of time he is allotted to do so will vary with the strategy employed, but going too long – twenty minutes the absolute maximum – will tend to counteract any bravura performance). Once the man becomes "famous", the effect will be multiplied (and because of his fame will contribute to the cause even if he lays the occasional "egg" of a sermon).

Stuffy Bible teaching, however, will need to be avoided at all costs: in the first place, while it is not a mistake to promise prospective attendees "Bible teaching", if the newcomers are actually being attracted by the other features presented in "outreach", they will not return if subjected to over half an hour of substantive teaching bereft of rhetorical flourish, emotional stimulation, and enjoyable stories. In short, every manufacturer has to know his clientele. And in Laodicea, the way to attract the numbers necessary to support any growing and successful (by the world's standards) church is through the right mix of exceptional friendliness, musical sensationalism, a stunning physical plant, and an exciting, impressive pastor. All of the "great churches" historically and especially nowadays have possessed these qualities in various mixes to a greater or lesser degree. What they all inevitably have in common, however, is making very little if any contribution to the spiritual growth of the Church of Jesus Christ. For a small group led by a man who is actually teaching the Bible in some depth and substance, none of these things are necessary – and any one of them could prove fatal.

~ Charity and Support for Missions / Evangelism. There is definitely biblical precedent for local churches supporting missions and evangelism (3Jn.1:5-7; cf. Matt.28:19-20), as well as for

monetary support given to other churches in need (Acts 24:17; Rom.15:26-27; 1Cor.16:1-3; 2Cor.8:1-24; 9:1-15; cf. Acts 11:28-30), as well as to individuals within the local church (1Tim.5:3-16). In the common experience of most of us, however, the best sort of charitable giving is that which comes directly from an individual given directly to another individual who is known and whose need is obvious. Collective action on the part of the local church will sometimes make sense in supporting missionaries and similar ministries with which the members are acquainted or which have been otherwise properly vetted. The example of Paul's solicitation of contributions for the Jerusalem church in the passages cited above represents a fairly unique situation. Suffice it to say that any church contemplating such church-to-church support would do well to study the care with which Paul addresses this issue – and the problems he encountered in administering this gift from beginning to end (it resulted in his captivity after all; cf. also 2Cor.8:1 - 9:15).

As to collective action within a local church, charity being given by the church to some of its members (as opposed to individual members helping out others they see to be in need), the lengthy passage on the support of widows directed to Timothy (1Tim.5:3-16) is likewise instructive of the potential complications of adopting such a policy – and the care which must be taken to avoid abuse at all levels.

In other words, what scripture does say about collective charitable enterprises suggests that individual efforts are not only simpler and less onerous to administer, but also much less susceptible to misuse and abuse. The above rightly assumes sound motivation on the part of individual members of a fellowship and the local church as a whole. For churches committed to the growth model, however, there will be a great temptation to support missions and evangelism *organizations* rather than individuals involved in these activities; and likewise in terms of charitable giving, "charities" as opposed to individuals in need of charity are more likely to be the recipients of the church's largess (and, inevitably, high profile organizations always accomplish less with more, focusing their efforts also on rather less deserving causes and recipients). This penchant on the part of growth-model churches for "recognized organizations" is because networking with large para-church operations helps to raise the church's profile and thus supports the new "holy grail" of increasing attendance and membership through such visibility, with concomitant increases of church income and free labor. In all giving and in all support for the ministries of others, our attitude is of prime importance. Growth-model churches tend to trumpet their "good works" as a means of advertising (cf. Matt.6:2). Individuals who are giving as individuals to individuals tend to keep the matter quiet and discrete (cf. Matt.6:3). Giving meant to raise the church's profile is always at risk of being done entirely for the wrong reason. Individual giving and occasional church support for individuals in service or in need is more easily kept in the right, godly frame of mind (Is.26:12b; Lk.17:10; Eph.2:10).

What a local church *should not* do:

~ Denominations. Christian unity is given a high priority in scripture (Rom.15:5; 1Cor.1:10; 2Cor.13:11; Eph.4:3; Phil.2:2-4; Col.3:14; 1Pet.3:8-9; see section II.C.3.f below), but that unity

is supposed to be built upon a mutual dedication to and embracing of the truth by individual Christians. Scripture is also clear about the fact that the truth is divisive (e.g., Matt.10:34; 1Cor.5:9-13; 1Jn.2:19; 2Jn.1:10-11; cf. Eph.6:17; Heb.4:12). The synthesis of these two only seemingly contradictory principles is that unity in fellowship and association is a good thing only when there is a common desire to know and to follow the truth – the better to know and follow Jesus Christ. When other priorities intrude, disassociation is preferable to unity for its own sake.

The development of denominations, while an understandable human tendency, has actually been very hurtful to genuine Christian unity (because of proclaiming a monopoly on the truth in opposition to all not officially part of their fellowship), and in the end directly counterproductive of the usual intended goal of preserving allegiance to the truth (because of the inevitable tendency of tradition to ritualize and deaden any actual love for the truth). Any two churches which are genuinely seeking the truth under the leadership of a pastor-teacher who is gifted, prepared and doing his job as unto the Lord, will have more in common than they have doctrinal differences. That is because the Bible is the truth, and if any pastor or group seeks long and hard enough in the Spirit, the Bible will lead to the same identical place. Problems only occur in this regard when the search for the truth stops, when victory is declared, when a creed is enshrined, when, that is, the group becomes weary of seeking the truth and proclaims, "this far and no farther" (the Reformers refraining from visiting the area of eschatology and essentially accepting Roman Catholic teachings in this regard, to cite one obvious example). What happens then, somewhat ironically, is *not* just a retarding of further forward progress in the truth, but an inevitable retrogression from the high-water mark the group had so far attained. That is because spiritual growth is individual, not institutional, so that creating a system which stymies individual spiritual growth (for the sake of corporate growth) will always lead to the individuals coming up in that system doing so out of respect and love for tradition rather than because of any interest in spiritual growth. In any case, believers in Jesus Christ are all part of His Church, the one true Church of Jesus Christ, and there is no authorization in scripture for any grouping of churches to seek to delimit the Bride of Christ to their peculiar approach alone.

~ Non-Biblical Rituals. In the history of the church-visible and in our day as well, there have been and are a plethora of rituals which various churches, groups and denominations have enshrined in their worship though not biblically authorized to do so. This is legalism, the institution of laws and rites in place of grace and truth. Given the pervasive nature of the problem, it would be impossible to list everything that might fall into this category, but a believer possessed of any measure of spiritual growth should easily be able to spot such activities which are legalistic, non-biblical, and essentially inimical to grace – and realize that he/she is in the wrong place. Water-baptism however practiced (sprinkling, immersion or any variation thereof, outside or inside), whomever is involved (babies or adults, new believers or re-baptizing those already so treated), whatever may be worn by the initiate, whatever words or formulae may be intoned, whatever meaning may be attributed to it, is a sure and certain sign of a desire for tradition over truth, and of little understanding of the scriptures. Other notable, man-made rituals to be avoided include "confirmation" of those baptized as infants or merely a ceremony for young adults invested with magical properties, dedication of babies, footwashing (a special illustration

by our Lord but not meant to be practiced as a ritual by His Church), and the like, as well as investing otherwise legitimate activities with magical properties, such as proclaiming a certain day of the week specially holy (whether Saturday or Sunday or any holiday or holy day), the abuse of the communion ceremony, the one actual and legitimate ceremony given by Christ to His Church for remembering Him, by adherence to the blasphemous false doctrine of transubstantiation whether fully or in part (or otherwise misstating the truth about this important ceremony; see section II.C.3.a below). Rituals often give people who have rejected any search for the truth a feeling of comfort, especially once they become familiar – but they are no substitute for the truth (and are in fact inimical to it in the end).

~ Tithing. Tithing was a sort of "income tax" for the divinely led state of Israel in the past. Its purpose was the support of the Levitical priesthood which has now been abrogated (Heb.7:12), as has been the Law on which it was based (Rom.10:4). Further, it was to be paid in agricultural produce, not money. And it was not even a yearly "tax" (Deut.14:28). And when it was brought to Jerusalem, those who brought it also "ate of it" (Deut.12:6-7). One could go on at some length. Suffice it to say that nothing screams legalism so loud as tithing does. It has no place in the true Church of Jesus Christ. The reason for its widespread use in spite of these prodigious cautionary details is obvious enough: the need of growth-model churches for sizeable and predictable income to feed their programs. Subjecting their members to a large dose of guilt through false teaching to achieve this, however, is beyond despicable.

~ Discipling. This is a particularly dangerous practice which seems on the point of becoming near universal in contemporary growth-model churches. Sometimes justified on the basis of "church discipline" (see section II.C.1.g below), sometimes on the basis of "spiritual growth", "discipling" actually has nothing whatsoever to do with being a true disciple of Jesus Christ. A disciple (Greek *mathetes*, literally, "student" or "one who learns"), biblically speaking, is a Christian who commits him/herself to learning what the Lord has to say and then carrying it out. This means growing spiritually through the truth, then following the truth in application of that truth to one's daily life, passing the tests that come and helping others do likewise. In other words, a true disciple is someone who is "doing his/her job" as a Christian in accordance with the actual teachings of scripture.

On the other hand, a disciple is *not* someone who lives his/her life according to what another member of the church tells them to do. But that is precisely what the non-biblical practice of "discipling" is, namely, the appointing of an individual monitor to direct and "hold accountable" the younger Christian, to direct his/her behavior, to hear his/her confessions, and to pass judgment in all matters great and small. This is the polar opposite of the genuine, biblical process of spiritual growth. That is because true spiritual growth has to come from the heart of the Christian in question as he/she makes good decisions to respond to the truth and do what Jesus is leading him/her to do. But "discipling" takes that freedom away and replaces it with the superior will of the monitor. Making decisions from faith is what the Christian life is all about, so merely the concept of "discipling" is abhorrent enough and would be even if the monitor were somehow a superior Christian in terms of genuine growth and gave only good instructions to the one being

"disciplined". But of course that is never the case – and never possibly could be the case because anyone who would take on such a role would have to be themselves so far sunk into legalism as to be barely functioning as a Christian – if a Christian in fact.

It is not too much to say that no cult was ever successful without "disciplining". They do not use the same vocabulary, but cults control their members by carefully regulating everything they do and say – so as to eventually control as far as possible what they think as well. Assigning loyal members who drank the Kool-Aid long ago to newer recruits who need careful watching until they too have had their free will effectively eradicated is an essential part of all cult inculcation. It is beyond sad that any church bearing the title "Christian" should lower itself to do the same – no matter how innocent the name may sound. Christians are accountable to Jesus Christ directly (Rom.14:4), not to other Christians, and especially not to a system of legalistic prying into their lives (Gal.2:4).

~ Creeds. No matter how well-intentioned or carefully constructed, all creeds and statements of faith amount to an extra-biblical false canon. It is impossible to construct a creed or statement of faith which will accurately express what the Bible teaches on any given point of doctrine, even if said point is perfectly well understood by the group or church in question. That is what *the Bible* does – and then it is *the Bible* that is meant to be explained / taught by the pastor-teacher of the church, taking as much time and effort as need be. People change, times change, language changes. So even a perfect creed (and as mentioned there can never be such a thing) would never be able to stand the test of time. Furthermore, creeds and statements of faith and catechisms inevitably come to take the place of solid Bible teaching. That is because on the one hand they essentially constitute a "this far and no farther" mandate, and on the other hand because they seem "sufficient": the "problem" has been solved for all time. Thus they are ideal for churches and groups who wish to have a facade of biblical authority . . . which they then feel free to ignore and move on to "more important things" – like growing the church / group.

~ False Teaching. The first church era, that of Ephesus, the one directly following the time of the apostles, did not, despite their wonderful and recent heritage, maintain their "first love" for the truth of the Word of God, and for that reason quickly suffered the penalty threatened by our Lord to "remove your lampstand" (Rev.2:5). Just as dedication to the truth is the essential thing for the Church on earth as a whole, so also teaching the truth is the one essential function that any church of Jesus Christ worthy of the name must continue to do despite all opposition. For those which do not, it may often not be a case of the Lord closing its doors; rather it frequently happens that this church/group which is disinterested in the truth fails to attract believers who are interested in growing spiritual – and driving away those within its midst who may have been so.

Is it better to have a large congregation generous with their time and money and dedicated to the growth of the group, its physical plant and its community "footprint", or a much smaller group truly interested in learning and living the truth of the Word of God? While the answer to this question may seem obvious, in our day of Laodicea it is a sad reality that the vast majority of churches and organizations have opted for the former and with gusto. At that point, namely, the

point of preferring worldly objectives to what the Lord wants from any church, it is not uncommon for outright false teaching, rather than "merely" a lack of teaching the truth, to enter in and come to dominate. When that point is reached, the "church" or denomination which allows this to happen is Christian in name only but not actually any part of Jesus' Church.

Subtly similar to this, even if not an actual sign of a Christian-in-name-only group, is the preference in most growth-model "teaching" for concentrating on subject matter "people want to hear" rather than diligently striving to teach the whole realm of biblical doctrine. That is why in so many such churches today the odds of hearing a Sunday sermon about marriage, relationships and various family matters are quite good if not a sure thing. The fact that beyond basic principles the Bible mostly takes these issues for granted (and thus says relatively little about them compared to other important issues) should be a signal to anyone in attendance that there is really no interest in the Bible or the truth in this place. Being "relevant" in teaching thus in essence means abnegating responsibility for doing the one thing a church is purposed to do: teach the whole truth of the Word of God.

What it might look like to do things the biblical way:

~ Flexibility in terms of form; inflexibility in terms of the truth. This is precisely the opposite of what we find in contemporary growth-model churches (not to mention traditional denominations) where truth is compromised for the sake of the goal of increasing numbers, wealth and influence. For while it is true that there are many differences in form in the way local churches and denominations today present themselves to the world, in fact on the one hand these tend to be merely variations on the same theme; and on the other hand, all such variations in fact tend to be inflexibly bound to the goal of growth in a Procrustean way. Anything that "works" is kept; anything that doesn't is either thrown over the side or relegated to the realm of window dressing (which amounts to the same thing). So when it comes to grinding out substantive teaching absent sermon-esque flourishes – which requires patience and discipline on the part of the congregation to accept and to learn – the fact that any such performance would drive away far more potential members than it would attract makes true Bible teaching one of the first things to be dispensed with.

The biblical approach would be just the opposite, doing the right thing regardless of the consequences – with growth no object to be pursued whatsoever. This is right and good. If a local church is doing its job and actually meeting with the purpose of teaching the Word of God, then it will attract, with God's help, individual Christians who value this. If it does not, the lack of growth-model promotional techniques will mean that it will die an easy, natural death, as attendees can easily "vote with their feet" and move on to find a fellowship which is teaching the Word (especially if there is no building, no tradition, and no formal membership). It should also be noted that, given the fact that we are in the era of Laodicea, a small or dwindling attendance in a group where the Word is being taught is not necessarily an indictment of the way the pastor-teacher / church is going about things: there are in fact very few such churches nowadays precisely because the demand for them is next to non-existent in our lukewarm era.

Flexibility in terms of non-essentials should be the rule. The word "church" conjures up all manner of building-related and ritual-related and tradition-related practices which almost everyone nowadays would associate with "church" – and in many cases Laodicean Christians would consider any group or gathering which did not model these non-essential practices "not a church". But we have demonstrated above that buildings, traditional practices and the wide variety of rituals engaged in by almost all "normal" churches today have nothing to do with scriptural mandates – and in many cases are inimical to the one legitimate purpose of a local church: spiritual growth through Bible teaching and mutual ministry support member to member through our individual spiritual gifts. And while on one level there are a great number of variations on the theme "church", on another level these differences are merely superficial in fact. So far from invalidating as a "church" any group or gathering which does not do things in the expected way (no matter what variation of "normal church" we are speaking about), it is fair to ask whether a group / church or organization which does *not* provide sufficient teaching of and attention to the truth is really worthy of the name. In other words, the very people / groups which find fault with and look down on non-traditional ways of teaching God's truth for spiritual growth are in fact the ones who are on the wrong side of this issue. Indeed, if a large group in a spectacular building with significant name recognition in the community does not actually provide any serious help in terms of advancing the spiritual growth of the individuals who attend, is it really a church at all . . . in the eyes of Him who is the Head of the Church?

So what would a church worthy of the name look like? The biblical answer is "a group of believers in Jesus Christ wherein the Word of God is esteemed and taught in sufficient depth and orthodoxy for significant spiritual growth to occur". This may not be happening in a "church building" or in a building at all. There may be no organized musical presentations or any music at all. And the believers who benefit from this church may not even have extensive personal fellowship with most of the others who also do so – beyond the prayer support they give and receive. The form is not important; the function is. And if the form strangles the proper, biblical function, then there is no spiritual profit for anyone.

(6) He also spoke this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. (7) Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' (8) "But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. (9) And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.' "

Luke 13:6-9 NKJV

B. The Pastor-Teacher

1. The Spiritual Gift of Pastor-Teacher

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep".

John 21:17 NKJV

How can they call upon someone they have not believed in? And how can they believe in what they have not heard about? And how can they hear without someone proclaiming [the truth]?
Romans 10:14

As these and many other passages show, teaching the Word of God is the main job of the pastor-teacher. All other functions and duties as well as all other issues related to the gift and the man to whom it has been given are inextricably interrelated to this fundamental truth. And no man can be a pastor-teacher who has not been given that *gift* by the Holy Spirit.

And as to those whom God has appointed [as officers] in the Church, [He appointed] apostles first [in rank], second prophets, third *teachers* (i.e., the only currently functioned authoritative gift) . . .
1st Corinthians 12:28a

Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some *pastors and teachers* . . .
Ephesians 4:11

(4) When you read these things you will be able to understand my spiritual insight into this mystery of Christ, (5) which was not made known to mankind in previous generations as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. (6) [And the mystery is this]: that the gentiles are [now] fellow heirs, members of the same body, and equal partakers of the promise [of salvation to Israel] in Christ Jesus through the gospel, [the proclamation of His victory]. (7) It is of this gospel that I have been made a minister *by the gift* of God's grace given to me through His dynamic power.
Ephesians 3:4-7

Do not neglect *the* [spiritual] *gift* [of pastor-teacher] which belongs to you and which was given to you [by the Spirit], [and which was proclaimed] through prophecy [and recognized] by the laying on of the hands of the elders.
1st Timothy 4:14

Therefore I remind you to stir up *the gift* of God which is in you [recognized] through the laying on of my hands.
2nd Timothy 1:6 NKJV [expanded]

2. The Calling and Responsibility of the Pastor-Teacher

This is a reliable saying: "If anyone desires the office of overseer (i.e., pastor-teacher), he is seeking [to do] an honorable work".
1st Timothy 3:1

Every believer is given spiritual gifts by the Holy Spirit at the point of faith in Christ (1Cor.12:4-11). In the process of growing spiritually, we are all led to discover where our personal strengths lie and what spiritual gifts we have been given. This is more often a gradual process than a sudden revelation. When a man becomes convinced in the Spirit that he has the gift of pastor-teacher, beginning the process of preparation to employ that gift for the Lord effectively is a natural and a godly step to take, for this is "an honorable work" which properly attended to promotes the edification of the Church of Jesus Christ – the purpose of the gift (Eph.4:11-16).⁴⁵ That said, the decision to prepare to teach the Word of God is one which should never be undertaken lightly.

(1) Let [every] man evaluate us this way, namely, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. (2) Now what you are looking for in stewards, moreover, is that one be found who is faithful [to the Lord] (i.e., and therefore worthy of His trust).

1st Corinthians 4:1-2

Being stewards of God's Word, God's mysteries of truth, and being servants of the Lord Jesus Christ commissioned to dispense that truth to His Church is an awesome responsibility. Faithfulness is required, as the passage above declares. Other gifts, other ministries, may perhaps be approached with unevenness (though that is certainly not recommended), and the Church be not too much the worse for wear. But what happens when the sheep are not fed on time? What happens when they are not led to the still waters of the Word, not guided into the right path to follow Christ, not protected in times of threats of false teaching from the death-darkness? Surely, the Lord will be their Protector even so, for He is the Great Shepherd of the sheep (Heb.13:20; 1Pet.5:4). But woe to that under-shepherd who signed on to do the job then proved unfaithful in the pinch.

Proclaim the Word! Keep at it, whether circumstances are favorable or not! Reprove, rebuke, [and] encourage with all patience [in your] teaching!

2nd Timothy 4:2

Sometimes, despite the problems of life and health and circumstances (job and family and finances and house and home), the blessed but also exacting process of studying and teaching the Word of God can be pleasant and not too onerous; but sometimes everything seems to conspire against the pastor-teacher by throwing obstacles into his path from seemingly all sides. As Paul tells Timothy in the verse above, however, a pastor-teacher is responsible to keep on doing his job, "in season and out of season", whether conditions seem favorable for doing so or not. Because the sheep need to be fed and pastured and led regardless of how the pastor feels or what pressures he is facing personally. The sheep need pasture even if the pastor has trouble on the job (Jn.21:15-17). The sheep need to be provided with the water of the Word despite any chronic

⁴⁵ 1st Peter 5:4 tells us that successfully discharging the office of pastor-teacher results in the crown of glory, but that is true of successful implementation of ministries generally. See CT 6, section I.7, "The Judgment and Reward of the Church".

health issues the pastor may be suffering. They need to be guided even when he is tired, and the wolf will not refrain from attacking in the darkness just because he feels he needs a vacation. Of all the responsibilities with which a Christian may be entrusted by the Lord, there is no greater one and no more important one than the responsibility given to the pastor-teacher to provide food for His flock when they require it and as often as they require it – a responsibility which cannot be taken too seriously.

And the Lord said, "Who then is that *faithful* and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season?"

Luke 12:42

In teaching the Word, moreover, a pastor can never forget that it is God's Word he is ministering, not his own material (if he is doing his job correctly, at any rate).

(10) As each one has received a [particular spiritual] gift, [so let us be] ministering it to each other as good stewards of the multi-faceted grace of God. (11) If anyone communicates, let him do so as if he were speaking words directly from God.

1st Peter 4:10-11a

Part of the responsibility to be faithful in service, therefore, is being fully aligned with the truth of the Word of God. A pastor teacher cannot just "show up" and be considered faithful; what he provides for the sheep has to be of the highest quality. And quality is measured by the Lord, not by those who listen to his teaching. It matters little if those who congregate to listen to his lessons enjoy them and praise him as a result – if what he is teaching has no substance or, worse, is not in line with the truth. A pastor-teacher is not responsible to the judgment of those who listen to him or to the itching ears of some who only wish to be entertained. Every pastor-teacher is responsible to the Lord to teach the truth, and to teach it substantively, with orthodoxy, and in sufficient depth and quantity to provide for the spiritual growth of those who come to listen to him.

(4b) The Lord is the One who judges me. (5) Therefore, do not make judgments before the time, until the Lord shall come, who will illuminate the hidden things of darkness, and reveal the intents of every heart, and then the praise of each shall come to him from God.

1st Corinthians 4:4b-5

On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts.

1st Thessalonians 2:4 NIV

Given the awesome nature of the responsibility of being a pastor-teacher, every man who determines that he does have that gift should certainly think twice before embarking on the path of preparing to employ it.

Don't many of you be teachers, my brothers, for you know that we will receive a stricter judgment.

James 3:1

3. The Qualifications of the Pastor-Teacher

In reality, there are no perfect pastor-teachers. Everyone – including those who are diligently teaching the Word of God – have "feet of clay" and occasionally make mistakes. But that is no excuse for not measuring up to the high standards scripture sets forth for those who take the Word of God upon their lips to proclaim it and to explain it and to encourage others with it. And the standards are high indeed. A pastor-teacher should possess and manifest . . .

~ Faithfulness

(1) Let [every] man evaluate us this way, namely, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. (2) Now what you are looking for in stewards, moreover, is that one be found who is faithful [to the Lord] (i.e., and therefore worthy of one's trust).

1st Corinthians 4:1-2

~ Wisdom

And the Lord said, "Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season?"

Luke 12:42 NKJV

~ Integrity and Seriousness

In all things setting an example in regard to what is good to do, in your teaching [demonstrating] integrity and seriousness.

Titus 2:7

~ Consistency

Proclaim the Word! Keep at it, whether circumstances are favorable or not! Reprove, rebuke, [and] encourage with all patience [in your] teaching!

2nd Timothy 4:2

~ Honesty without Guile

For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness—God is witness.

1st Thessalonians 2:5 NKJV

~ A Good Reputation

Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

1st Timothy 3:7 NKJV

~ Impartiality

I charge you before God [the Father], and Christ Jesus, and the elect angels, that you keep to these [commands] without partiality, doing nothing out of favoritism.

1st Timothy 5:21

~ Moral Courage

(18) And when they had come to him, he said to them: "You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, (19) serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; (2) how ***I kept back nothing that was helpful***, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, (21) testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ."

Acts 20:18-21 NKJV

I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself.

1st Corinthians 4:3 NKJV

Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Galatians 1:10 NIV

Scripture also gives us two lists of characteristics for the pastor-teacher (the "teaching elder" and/or "bishop/overseer" of the church). Paul was inspired by the Spirit to pen these two lists which give the "left and right guide posts" for choosing an acceptable candidate so that Timothy and Titus – and so any church appointing a pastor, or, more to the point, any Christian seeking a source of teaching – might easily be able to identify positive prospects and eliminate clearly unsuitable ones.

(2) A bishop (lit. "overseer", i.e., pastor-teacher / elder) then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; (3) not given to wine, not violent, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy for money; (4) one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (5) (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); (6) not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. (7) Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

1st Timothy 3:2-7 NKJV

While most of these characteristics are self-explanatory, a short discussion of each will be helpful:

~ *blameless*: Not "sinless" – since no one could then be a pastor-teacher – but "not subject to / vulnerable to accusation" for anything in his life. This does not mean that a pastor-teacher is disqualified the minute a false accusation is lodged against him; it does mean if the man is involved in any activity or behavior that lends itself to legitimate allegations of impropriety or illegal conduct that he should be disqualified.

~ *the husband of one wife*: This does not mean that the pastor-teacher has to be married (Paul and Timothy were not), nor that he can never have been divorced or even remarried (as Moses was), but that no man who has more than one wife – legally (through polygamy, which was allowed in many places in the ancient world) or defacto (i.e., keeping a mistress) – can be a pastor-teacher.

~ *temperate*: The Greek adjective *nephalios* means, literally, "sober", in the sense of not being continually under the influence of wine; however, this characteristic (in light of "not given to wine" below) is meant to have a broader reach: moderation in all things wherein moderation is appropriate (not just in regard to alcohol).

~ *sober-minded*: This Greek adjective *sophron* can also be translated "prudent" and has to do with avoiding situations, behaviors, circumstances and individuals which are (spiritually) dangerous.

~ *of good behavior*: The Greek adjective *kosmios* has to do with setting things in order (cf. 'cosmos' and 'cosmetics'). Since we are speaking here of a potential pastor-teacher's moral characteristics, "good behavior" seems a fitting representation of something equivalent in English. For it is not just that the pastor-teacher ought to be a well-organized person (the moral significance of, e.g., lining his shoes up neatly versus tossing them in a pile is no basis for excluding or approving a man for this job); the point of the adjective in this context is that he ought to be a man whose behavior is consistently proper, more "smooth" than "rough", in how he speaks, comports himself, organizes his life. The fact that there is no qualifier prefixed here (i.e., no "well-" / Greek *eu-*) means that we have to allow leeway for different personalities and styles, and only see a problem if the roughness or disorganization is noticeably problematic.⁴⁶

~ *hospitable*: This is a traditional (and defensible) translation, but "friendly" communicates the essential idea here. The Greek adjective *philoxenos* does not mean here that the pastor-teacher has to have members of the congregation over to his house for dinner regularly or that he ought to take homeless persons in for the night; it does mean that a good pastor-teacher does what he reasonably can do not to make those who might come to learn from him feel uncomfortable or unwelcome or otherwise unworthy or unwanted – just the opposite.

⁴⁶ Incidentally, the fact that after our Lord's resurrection He must have carefully folded the clothe covering His face and placed it deliberately aside has always struck the author as of some significance (Jn.20:7).

~ *able to teach*: As we shall see below, teaching is the key to the proper fulfillment of this gift. This is so very important that, in spite of the fact that the point is made extensively elsewhere (and in fact immediately after the list in the companion passage of Titus chapter one covered below), the Spirit found it necessary to add this to the list here as well: if a man does not demonstrate a clear ability to communicate and teach, the chances are that he does not in fact have the gift of pastor-teacher, even though he may be a fine Christian who fulfills all of the other requirements contained in this and other passages.

~ *not given to wine*: Again, this is a question of behavior, and specifically of the sort of behavior that having too much to drink may occasion. The adjective *paroinos* has to do not only with being present at social occasions where alcohol is imbibed but to be negatively affected by that use (from overuse). This word does not preclude the use of alcohol by the pastor-teacher in such moderation that it will not negatively affect his behavior (cf. 1Tim.5:23 later in this epistle), but it does tell us that a man who is known not only to use alcohol but to do so to such a degree as to be frequently and noticeably under its influence is not fit for the pastorate.

~ *not violent*: The noun *plektes* here (lit., "striker") is characterizing the person in question as quick to use his hands violently when offended. This is not speaking of legitimate self-defense of himself or others (should that ever come up), but of gratuitously used violence, readily and aggressively resorted to.

~ *gentle*: The root *epieik-* has to do with being measured in one's responses, kind in one's outlook and disposition, merciful in one's dealing with others. That is to say, a pastor-teacher needs to have a careful and considerate approach when it comes to interacting with his congregation, one which is grounded in humility and love for them and is not precipitous, arrogant and self-serving.

~ *not quarrelsome*: More literally "not given to battle" (Greek *amachos*), meaning non-pugnacious in his relations with others, not just physically but also even more importantly verbally. Some individuals love an argument, but while the pastor-teacher is called to defend the truth whenever necessary, being overly argumentative about it usually obscures the truth that the confrontation is putatively meant to support. Such behavior also riles tempers, engenders factions, and generally stirs up trouble – supposedly for the sake of the truth, but in practice to the detriment of its teaching and reception.

~ *not greedy for money*: Money is a necessity in the modern even more so than in the ancient world. The legitimate desire to pay one's own way and support one's family in an acceptable manner is not "loving money". But putting Mammon before everything else, however, is a surefire method to destroy one's spirituality and ministry (Matt.6:24; 1Tim.6:10; cf. Lk.16:14; Heb.13:5). Therefore a congregation calling a pastor-teacher or making arrangements to support one (so that he can devote more time to studying the Word and teaching them), needs to do what is right in regard to the issue of finances, but should be wary of putting too much confidence in a man who is preoccupied with this issue.

~ *one who rules his own house well*: Along with the next two characteristics, this one comes with an expanded explanation. Being a good manager of one's household in Paul's day meant primarily bringing up his children (if he had them) decently so that they behaved themselves well. The other functions of the household were typically managed by the wife (i.e., not just "cooking and cleaning", but the finances and purchasing and every other aspect of what needs to be done to keep a household in good working order); but the husband was responsible for the discipline. Certainly, things may work differently at different times and in different cultures (in ours today, for example). But the principle here still applies nonetheless: having children who are undisciplined and out of control is an indication that the man in question will not have the requisite skills to prevent similar meltdowns in the church group.

~ *not a novice*: This Greek word (*neophytos*, literally, "new planting", the origin of our "neophyte") does not refer to chronological age. Rather, it refers to the length of time a person has been a Christian. Not that new converts cannot occasionally, through their enthusiasm for the Word of God, get to the point of spiritual maturity and beyond far more rapidly than many who have been in the faith for years. In fact that happens all the time. But until a person has been a Christian for at least some period of time, it is difficult to gauge how he/she will react not only to the special pressures which Christians encounter but also to the unique temptations the devil puts in our paths. A man who is going to be leading the church through his teaching cannot afford to be dealing with these things for the first time, because, as any of us who have been in the faith for a while can attest, it is not uncommon for any of us to have to stumble a few times before we finally get our footing. But the leader of the congregation cannot afford scandal (literally, "being tripped up). How new is too new? Scripture deliberately does not give any sort of specifics on that question for the obvious reason that this will vary from person to person, with some men exhibiting the seasoning of "veteran status" much sooner, and others not being solid on this point even after much time has elapsed. A potential pastor-teacher has to be "seasoned and experienced enough" in the faith, and he as well as his potential congregation need to apply that test reasonably but carefully. Anyone who is still green enough to let the position of pastor-teacher "go to his head" (so as to be tripped up by the behavior said swelled-head is likely to engender – as did the devil) is by definition not yet ready to take on this awesome responsibility.

~ *having a good testimony*: Those outside of the church, meaning primarily unbelievers, may well be inclined to think poorly of any Christian because of their own rejection of the Lord and of His truth. However, it makes little sense to give the devil an opening to reproach the new pastor-teacher and his church with him because of some serious public demerit or stain on his reputation which is actually justified. As our passage affirms, this will merely lead the man and his church into Satan's trap. If it is a question of some flaw or failing in the man's past which has been paid for, rectified, buried in the past with good behavior thereafter, that is one thing. But if a man is presently involved in any sort of activity or relationship or compromising situation, this must be attended to and resolved first before he is allowed to teach the Word.

(5) For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you (6) if a man is blameless, the

husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. (7) For a bishop (lit. "overseer", i.e., pastor-teacher / elder as in v.5) must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, (8) but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, (9) holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.

Titus 1:5-9 NKJV

The list of pastor-teacher characteristics given by Paul to Titus is similar to the one he gave to Timothy, but not identical. We can certainly glean from that fact that neither list is meant to be comprehensive. That is to say, positive qualities and negative characteristics not mentioned are not to be excluded from consideration when evaluating pastor-teachers for that reason alone. Rather, the combination of qualities provided are meant to give Christians a solid sense of what a good pastor-teacher should be (and what he should not be). Some of the characteristics on this second list are unique to it and will thus also profit from a brief discussion:

blameless: See previous list.

the husband of one wife: See previous list.

having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination: This is very similar to "having his children in submission with all reverence" in 1st Timothy 3:4-5, but it further illuminates what that passage means: no one is perfect, and children in particular often have growing pains. The standard here is not therefore one of perfection. But if a man's children are so openly unbelievers that there is no doubt that they do not qualify as "faithful", and if they are so worthy of condemnation for wild behavior that this is widely and publicly known, then the man's lack of ability to provide even a basic level of order and spiritual leadership to his own household augurs poorly for his leadership of a church where his job is to be "God's dispenser" of the truth.

not self-willed: The Greek adjective *authades* and other parts of speech from the same root have to do with stubbornness, arrogance, and surliness. Etymologically the word-group has to do with "putting one's own desires first". A pastor-teacher needs to be resolute and unflinching in defense of the truth, but reasonable in all things where the truth itself is not at issue. Stubbornness for its own sake is no virtue, and arrogantly assuming one's own correctness and/or demanding compliance in all matters based on one's position is a model to be avoided at all costs (even though it is easily recognized today in all too many pastors and groups).

not quick-tempered: Different from the above, the tendency to have one's anger quickly flare up is not uncommon, and this characteristic is easily aggravated in the case of men who are in important positions of authority and responsible for others. Seen in that respect, the *tendency* – of protectiveness and of quickly mustering the inner-resources to do what is needed – is not a bad thing. However, being in the habit of having little control over this tendency so that it is allowed to flare up before the facts are known, and also of allowing it to run riot in all manner of trivial

situations where no such reaction is needed or justified, is very dangerous for the man himself and also for his congregation. Impulsiveness in this respect did Moses no good as we all remember (Num.20:10-13). Not all people have this characteristic of a disposition towards becoming enraged easily. For those men who do, a track record of failing to control it at critical junctures is a disqualifying trait.

not given to wine: See previous list.

not violent: See previous list.

not greedy for money: This is similar to (and often translated identically with) the "not greedy for money" of 1st Timothy 3:3; however, the Greek adjective is different: *aischrokerdes* in our present passage, meaning, etymologically, "characterized by shameful gain". The essential meaning and usage is the same (as synonyms), but this term gives special warning against accepting as a pastor-teacher any man whose prime reason for being in the pastorate is that of personal, financial gain (along the lines of the false teachers of 1Tim.6:5).

hospitable: See previous list.

a lover of what is good: "Good" here is what is truly good, namely, the Lord, His Church, and the truth of the Word of God. A pastor-teacher who is genuinely enthusiastic about the wonderful opportunity he has been given to lead his congregation forward spiritually through the teaching of the Bible for the glory of Jesus Christ is to be esteemed; any prospective pastor who does not demonstrate this quality is to be avoided.

sober-minded: See previous list.

just: Pastor-teachers are often called upon to weigh in on or settle disputes, or to otherwise give their judgment in matters where others are concerned. Fairness and concern for what is right should characterize his dealings with one and all.

holy: Holiness is the separation of what is godly from what is profane. All believers are charged with being holy (1Pet.1:15-16), and without pursuing sanctification (the process of becoming holy), "no one will see the Lord" (Heb.12:14). No Christian in these bodies of corruption will ever achieve complete holiness this side of heaven, but it is very clear that we are called to become more rather than less godly as we walk closer with Jesus Christ through His truth day by day. A prospective pastor-teacher whose conduct is such that it leads to the conclusion "not holy" is certainly not ready to take on a church.

self-controlled: Self-control (Greek root *enkrat-*) is one of the prime Christian virtues Peter includes on his list for all believers (2Pet.1:6; cf. 1Cor.9:25; Gal.5:23). Self-restraint in avoiding sin and all manner of negative behaviors while at the same time governing oneself to continue doing what needs to be done on the other side of the coin is a critically important trait any pastor-

teacher will need to do his job effectively, day in and day out. Because the temptations for him to let down and let go will be great, both because of the grinding nature of the "study-and-teach" regime, and also because pastor-teachers – especially those who are actually doing their job as the Lord wants it done – are some of the devil's favorite targets.

holding fast the faithful word: The Word of God must be the pastor-teacher's guiding star in all things and at all times. He needs to love it personally and teach it faithfully. For it is the Word and the power of it in one's heart, energized by the Holy Spirit, which produce and empower faithfulness, keeping him safe and moving forward spiritually along with his congregation. This final characteristic is given last by Paul for a reason: in many respects it is the most important of all. A man who truly is "holding fast" to God's Word will be motivated and enabled to become what the other characteristics listed above demand of him; but anyone who is not doing so will be very fragile in his faith (so that even if on the surface he fulfills the other requirements, that fulfillment will be merely superficial). Moreover, the purpose of having a pastor-*teacher* is to teach the Word of God so that those who attend this gathering of believers may grow spiritually themselves, be encouraged by the truth to fight a good fight, and become equipped to be able to help others in turn through the ministries given to them.

4. The Preparation of the Pastor-Teacher

"The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is *fully trained* will be like their teacher."⁴⁷

Luke 6:40 NIV

Since ability in teaching the Word is the quality which is most to be sought in a pastor-teacher, finding a man who has passed the other tests above and who is genuinely prepared to teach is of prime importance. Since all truth beyond natural revelation is available today only in the holy scriptures, knowledge of the Bible is thus paramount.

Be zealous to present yourself to God [as one] approved [in what you do], a workman who does not need to be ashamed, [like a skillful carpenter] "cutting straight" the Word of truth.

2nd Timothy 2:15

The Bible, of course, while it may be held in one's hand, even if a person devoted every waking moment to it would take many lifetimes to completely understand and appreciate, let alone explicate in a way that helped other believers grow spiritually. So while the prospective pastor-teacher obviously needs to know a great deal about scripture, he must also have come to possess the tools necessary to continue his personal growth in it and understanding of it. Since the Bible is

⁴⁷ The Greek participle *katertismenos*, translated "trained" here means, more specifically, "spiritually grown up and tested"; for a fuller discussion of this term and the root on which it is based, see BB 6A: Peripateology, section II.1, "Spiritual Growth Vocabulary".

written in Hebrew and Greek (with some small sections in Aramaic), a working knowledge of the original languages is highly desirable. Since the Bible was written long ago in the past and to recipients whose culture was significantly different from our own, some knowledge of ancient history and Hebrew, Greek, Hellenistic and Roman cultures within which the Bible was penned is also helpful.

What you heard from me, keep as the [systematic] pattern (*hypotyposis*) of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus.

2nd Timothy 1:13 NIV (cf. 2Tim.3:10)

Most important of all, the possession of a good, solid, orthodox and systematic framework of the truths scripture expresses is absolutely essential. After all, it is theoretically possible to have the entire English Bible memorized and not have a solid grasp even of the Trinity, even though that doctrine is unmistakably present within its pages. Doctrines, true teachings of the scripture, are put together painstakingly one verse at a time with much effort under the Spirit's guidance. This process has been going on since the apostolic period (where, as we have seen, even the apostles had to learn the implications of the new dispensation of the Church Age by this same process in the power of the Spirit). For that reason, no pastor-teacher springs fully-formed from the ground. Every good teacher has had at least one good teacher of his own, and often more than one (cf. Matt.10:24-25). But every truly dedicated pastor-teacher should take pains to investigate every truth he teaches from the ground up. If he does so earnestly, not only will he confirm the good teachings he has received – and he will be all the more solid in faith for having done so – but he will also through this diligent process refine them and expand them, all the time making these truths more and more his own with the result that he will be better able to teach them to others.

Good systems of doctrine – and good teachers – are hard to come by in our Laodicean day. But this is a problem which the church-visible has always had. The era of Ephesus, the one directly following that of the apostles, quickly became sclerotic in regard to spiritual advance and as a result lost the oral teaching of the apostles, "abandoning their first love", that is, love of the truth (Rev.2:4). The era of Ephesus thus shows us clearly enough that holy living (for which these believers are commended: Rev.2:2-3) is not enough: spiritual advance is essential if spiritual decay is not to replace it.

For all these reasons, being conversant with traditional, reformed and evangelical systematic theology, while not worthless, is no substitute for a deep fluency in a living, breathing system of true teaching which draws its power directly from the scripture (rather than being hamstrung by tradition). Naturally, there are also many false systems to be avoided which, while also not traditional, bear little relation to the truth. The strait and narrow way leads upward between these two extremes. All this being the case, some familiarity with church history is also beneficial for the preparing pastor-teacher, not so much for any light that will be shed on the truth, but so as to have a fair appreciation of the origins and weaknesses of mainstream tradition, and also of the sorts of heretical movements and false teaching with which the church-visible has had to deal over the centuries. What a study of church history will not provide is any meaningful insight into the lives of those believers in any given era of the Church who genuinely did grow, progress and

produce for Jesus Christ, albeit not in such a public way as to make the history books (the same phenomenon of course still being the case today).

Finally, there is no one-size-fits-all list of tools the prospective pastor-teacher must have in order to be effective. Every man's preparation will be different in some respects from all others. If a man possesses a solid system of truth in his heart, a deep knowledge of scripture, and is experienced in the proper method of studying it and teaching it (and that will be obvious from the very first Bible class), then his personal preparation of spiritual growth, and his perseverance with the Lord and in the truth will doubtless see him through so as to be able to minister to the people of God to whom the Spirit has drawn him. In the end, these things are more important than the (admittedly very important) academic tools, for only those who have been tested in the fire are likely to have the requisite tenacity to build the structure the Lord has called them to build.

(28) "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? (29) For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, (30) saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.' "

Luke 14:28-30 NIV

5. The Duties of the Pastor-Teacher

How can they call upon someone they have not believed in? And how can they believe in what they have not heard about? And how can they hear without someone proclaiming [the truth]?

Romans 10:14

While we all understand – or ought to – that it is the Holy Spirit who really does the teaching of the Word of God (Neh.9:20; 1Cor.2:13-16; 1Jn.2:27; cf. Jn.6:45; Eph.2:22; 3:16; 1Thes.4:9), He makes use of the godly efforts of those who have been gifted, prepared and called to do so – that is, pastor-teachers.

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep".

John 21:17 NKJV

With an unmistakable threefold repetition, our Lord impresses upon Peter, the leader of the eleven, the necessity for all of them to "feed my sheep", that is, to provide the Church, the Body of Christ with nutritious spiritual food on a consistent and regular basis, with "eating" then being a picture of faith in this truth as it is taught (Matt.24:45; Lk.12:42; Acts 20:28; 1Cor.3:2; 1Tim.4:6; Heb.5:12-14; 1Pet.2:2; 1Pet.5:2; cf. Matt.14:16; Mk.6:37; Lk.9:13; Jude 1:12). This is the last recorded conversation between our Lord and the apostles prior to His words to them just before the ascension, and we are certainly to take from this that while others may have a different opinion about this, to the Chief Shepherd of the sheep, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, teaching the

Word of God is absolutely the top priority for any man who has been called to the "pastorate" and entrusted with part of His flock. Indeed, it is the **only** thing our Lord mentions. We may conclude, therefore, that a pastor-teacher who is providing his congregation with enough high-quality spiritual food for them to grow is "doing his job" as the Lord would have him do, but if not . . .

In scripture, the gift of pastor-teacher is sometimes called "pastor", sometimes "teacher", and sometimes, as in Ephesians 4:11, "pastor-teacher". While "teaching" is straightforward enough, perhaps a word or two about "pastor" would not be out of place. The analogy of the under-shepherd tending that part of the flock with which he has been entrusted by the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, our Lord Jesus Christ, is a frequent one in scripture, and while it is true that just as a shepherd cares for his flock, so the pastor is directed to care for his parishioners, the main **means** of so doing is frequently misconstrued. But as our Lord's words in the passage quoted directly above make so clear, feeding the sheep is the pastor's primary concern, and teaching the Word of God in a substantive and orthodox way is the means of doing so. That is how the pastor "pastures" or "pastors" his flock. Believers need the truth of the Word of God for encouragement, guidance and direction in their lives – and of course for their overall spiritual growth. No pastor can encourage anyone aright without the Word of God, and no pastor can lead or guide his flock forward spiritually apart from the teaching of the Word of God. No other duties, necessary or really superfluous, can hold a candle to this fundamental responsibility of the pastor-teacher:

And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you (i.e., in teaching the Word), and are over you in the Lord and admonish you (i.e., through the Word), and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake (i.e., in studying and teaching).
1st Thessalonians 5:12-13a NKJV

Until I (i.e., Paul) come, devote yourself to [public] reading [of the scriptures], to encouragement, to **teaching** [the Word].
1st Timothy 4:13

Let those elders who lead well be held worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in **the Word** and in **teaching**.
1st Timothy 5:17

Be zealous to present yourself to God [as one] approved [in what you do], a workman who does not need to be ashamed, [like a skillful carpenter] "cutting straight" **the Word** of truth.
2nd Timothy 2:15

Proclaim **the Word!** Keep at it, whether circumstances are favorable or not! Reprove, rebuke, [and] encourage with all patience [in your] **teaching!**
2nd Timothy 4:2

(7) In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your **teaching** show integrity, seriousness (8) and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those

who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.
Titus 2:7-8 NIV

Dedication to studying and teaching the Word of God as the primary, secondary and even tertiary responsibilities of the pastor-teacher (such as indicated above) is the only way for a man with this gift placed into service by the Lord to do his duty. Coupled with setting a good example, studying and teaching so as to feed the flock of Jesus Christ compromises the full and proper function of this important gift.

(1) So I urge the elders among you as a fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, even one who shares [with you] in the glory which is about to be revealed, (2) **pastor** the flock of God under your charge (i.e., primarily through feeding them with the Word of God), overseeing them not out of compulsion but willingly in response to God, not eager for shameful material gain, but out of genuine enthusiasm, (3) not lording it over the charges [entrusted to you], but as genuine examples to your flock. (4) And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will carry off in victory the crown of glory which will never fade.

1st Peter 5:1-4 (cf. Heb.13:17)

Teaching gifts have been given "greater honor" by the Lord due to their relative rarity in the Body (1Cor.12:24; Greek: "giving greater honor to the member in short supply"; cf. 1Cor.14:12), but it is only those who carry out their duties well who are worthy of this "double honor" (1Tim.5:17). So while believers are to seek out those with such "greater" gifts for communicating the Word of God (1Cor.12:31), those who possess such gifts labor under an even greater responsibility:

(10) As each one has received a [particular spiritual] gift, [so let us be] ministering it to each other as good stewards of the multi-faceted grace of God. (11) If anyone communicates, let him do so as if he were speaking words directly from God.

1st Peter 4:10-11a

This is a high standard indeed, and helps to explain James' warning to the effect that "not many" should endeavor to be teachers – because of the stricter judgment teacher's receive (Jas.3:1). Any man who believes he has this gift, therefore, needs to realize 1) that the gift is all about the communication of God's truth to the glory of Jesus Christ (and not in any way about personal glorification, prestige or remuneration); 2) that while the gift gives insight into the truth and also facility with communicating, it is not "magic"; there is no "miraculous" inspiration of the individual concerned; rather, the Spirit uses the truth in the Bible and the truth believed and understood in the pastor-teacher's heart as His basis for empowering communication – in the same exact way in which He empowers all spiritual gifts; 3) that therefore hard work in digging out the truth of scripture and hard work in finding an appropriate way to communicate it are essential features of a teaching ministry well-performed; 4) and that for this reason a solid course of preparation before entering into actual teaching is much to be preferred. For it is not the response of the congregation or the numbers attracted or any other extraneous factor which validates the true success of any teaching ministry. Rather it is the Lord who will evaluate us all on that great

day of days, according to how we have actually performed in His perfect judgment.

Each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work.

1st Corinthians 3:13 NASB

And as to those whom God has appointed [as officers] in the Church, [He appointed] apostles first [in rank], second prophets, third teachers (i.e., the only currently functioned authoritative gift) . . .

1st Corinthians 12:28a

(11) Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (12) in order *to prepare* all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be built up, (13) until we all reach that unifying [goal] of belief in and full-knowledge of the Son of God, that each of us might be a perfect person, that is, that we might attain to that standard of maturity of the fullness of Christ; (14) that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, (15) but rather that we may, by embracing the truth in love, grow up in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. (16) In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love.

Ephesians 4:11-16

Since then the main duty of the pastor-teacher is to prepare his congregation for their own ministry activities, supplying them with the spiritual nutrition necessary to grow is the job he must attend to before all others. Publically reading scripture (Col.4:16; 1Thes.5:27; 1Tim.4:13), and encouraging through the Word of God those who have placed him in authority are also important (1Thes.3:2; 1Tim.4:13; Heb.10:25), but both of these additional duties are intrinsically linked to teaching the Bible (and it is hard to imagine a Bible class worth its salt where these two associated things did not occur). The pastor-teacher's job is "to teach" – just as our Lord made so clear to Peter (Jn.21:15-17). And in doing so he must teach the whole realm of truth, the doctrines of the entire Bible, leaving nothing out, neither judgment nor mercy, but proclaiming "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:20 and 20:27; cf. Prov.24:11-12), never giving in to fear or pressure, never professing doubts or relativism (Ezek.22:26), having the courage not to avoid any truth just because it is controversial and not to adopt any position just because it is popular, and always keeping to the pure truth of the Word of God as his conscience and the Holy Spirit guide him (2Cor.1:12; 4:2; 1Tim.1:19; 3:9), nourished in and nourishing others "in the words of faith and of the good doctrine" which he has carefully followed (1Tim.4:6).

Proclaim the Word! Keep at it, whether circumstances are favorable or not! Reprove, rebuke, [and] encourage with all patience [in your] teaching!

2nd Timothy 4:2

Does this mean that it is out of line for pastor-teachers to do marriages, funerals, calling, counseling, and church administration and socializing? Nothing in scripture prevents a pastor from doing these things, but if he does, before he knows it, he will have little to no time and energy for studying and teaching – and *that* is his job before the Lord.

(2) Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. (3) Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; (4) but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Acts 6:2-4 NKJV

6. The Heart of the Pastor-Teacher

I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you.

2nd Corinthians 7:3 NIV

(28) Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

(29) Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

2nd Corinthians 11:29 NIV

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stay true to the Lord. I love you and long to see you, dear friends, for you are my joy and the crown I receive for my work.

Philippians 4:1 NLT

(6) But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. (7) Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. (8) For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. (9) How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? (10) Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

1st Thessalonians 3:6-10 NIV

The above is just a brief sample: Paul's letters are replete with expressions of love for his congregations; and this care and concern for those ministered to is not unique to Paul – or at least it should not be. A good shepherd naturally cares for his sheep, so much so that he is willing to risk life and limb to protect them from the wolves (Jn.10:11-12; Acts 20:28-31), and to go out in search of even one who wanders off (Matt.18:12-13; Lk.15:4). A good pastor-teacher wants his whole congregation to thrive and to grow spiritually, progress and produce most of all. That is why he studies and teaches the Word of God so fanatically – because that is the only reliable

means of helping them and protecting them. This is a matter of life and death – and even more important for the pastor-teacher than his own death:

(12) So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. (13) I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, (14) because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. (15) And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.

2nd Peter 1:12-15 NIV

As in the example of Peter above, a good pastor-teacher is not overly concerned with what his congregation thinks about him or his methods. He does what is right regardless of how it might be received. His teaching might seem "boring" to some and repetitive. But he is looking ahead to the days of crisis, times when he might not be there to hold his congregation's hands. He is striving to give those willing to listen to him and learn from him the inner resources to fight whatever fight may come.

(5) You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. (6) We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. (7) Instead, we were like young children [Gk. "innocent"] among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, (8) so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

1st Thessalonians 2:5-8 NIV

Just as parents are willing to sacrifice anything for their children, so a good pastor-teacher puts the welfare of his congregation before that of himself.

But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.

Philippians 2:17 NIV

A good pastor-teacher, like a good parent, loves his charges, but is not primarily concerned about them loving him back. He is not engaged in a popularity contest; he is not trying to be their friend; he is trying to help them grow – and sometimes that requires "tough love" to be exercised in remonstrating with his congregation whenever they are straying from the truth or behaving themselves in inappropriate ways (cf. 2Tim.4:2-5).

And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves.

1st Thessalonians 5:12-13 NKJV

After all, the sheep given to the pastor-teacher to shepherd are only his "on loan" – from the Chief

Shepherd of the sheep. And it is to Him that every pastor-teacher ultimately answers.

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account (i.e., before Jesus Christ). Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

Hebrews 13:17 NKJV

That being the case, there is no such thing as a part-time shepherd. Once a man takes on the responsibility of caring for sheep, that care has to be available and exercised every day. Just as in the case of actual sheep, they need to be fed and watered, they need to be moved from place to place (spiritually speaking); and they need protection from wolves and the like – and one can ever predict when or how wolves will attack (Jn.10:11-12; Acts 20:28-31). And sheep are very much a flock of individuals, despite how they may look to the untrained eye of the non-shepherd. Some will wander, some will resist moving, some will eat and some won't, some will drink and some won't. Some will be more fearful of non-existent dangers than others; some will not be prudent enough. Some will demand a lot of personal attention; others will never let a bleat be heard – but that does not necessarily mean that all is well. With experience, the pastor-teacher must figure out how to assess the condition and provide appropriately for the flock the Lord gives him to care for. It is an awesome responsibility and also a never-ending one. So every man called to the pastorate does have to figure out how to deal with personal tendencies to "not want to do it today", because we pastor-teachers have to be ready to do our job "in season and out of season" as Paul tells Timothy (2Tim.4:2). That does not mean that pastors have to be super-human or that they never get a break or a vacation or that they never break down for a while; it does mean that the latter had better not happen for more than a couple of days, and that it had better not interfere seriously with them doing their job. The Lord has very specific feelings about that.

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

1st Peter 5:2-4 NKJV

7. The Pastor-Teacher as Exemplar

And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

2nd Timothy 2:2 ESV

No pastor-teacher springs forth from a vacuum. Anyone who is successful in ministering the Word – as our Lord counts success – will have learned his basic doctrinal system from another pastor-teacher's ministry (just as Timothy learned from Paul in the verse above; cf. 2Tim.3:10).

If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully

followed.

1st Timothy 4:6 NKJV

(13) Until I come, devote yourself to [public] reading [of the scriptures], to encouragement [through the Word], to the teaching [of the Word]. (14) Do not neglect the [spiritual] gift [of pastor-teacher] which belongs to you and which was given to you [by the Spirit], [and which was proclaimed] through prophecy [and recognized] by the laying on of the hands of the elders. (15) Be diligent in these things (i.e., studying and teaching the Word). Make them your primary concern so that your spiritual progress may be evident to all. (16) Apply them (i.e., the truths you learn) to yourself and to your teaching. Stick [faithfully] to them. For in so doing you will bring yourself and those who heed you safely home.

1st Timothy 4:13-16

Be zealous to present yourself to God [as one] approved [in what you do], a workman who does not need to be ashamed, [like a skillful carpenter] "cutting straight" the Word of truth.

2nd Timothy 2:15

But as for you – model yourself on my teaching, my methodology, my plan of action, my faith, my endurance, my love, my perseverance . . .

2nd Timothy 3:10

(14) But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, (15) and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. (16) All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, (17) that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2nd Timothy 3:14-17 NKJV

As all of these passages make clear, therefore, faithfulness to the truth, preserving and handing down in turn the truth one has learned and believed, expanding on that heritage in a good and godly way, and persevering in this noble task of teaching the Word of God is the prime example the pastor-teacher must set.

Let no one despise [you on account of] your youth, but make yourself a good example to those who are faithful through your speaking, your behavior, your love, your faith, your holiness.

1st Timothy 4:12

It is certainly true that if the pastor-teacher stumbles in his behavior in serious regard, it will detract from his ministry. But even though this is to be avoided because of the reproach it brings to Christ's Church, it also must be pointed out that perfectly sanctified (and even sanctimonious) behavior on the pastor-teacher's part is insufficient: if he is not teaching the Word of God as he

should, he is not doing His job properly before the Lord, no matter how impeccable his behavior.

(7) In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness (8) and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.

Titus 2:7-8 NIV

Guarding the purity of his behavior is not unimportant for the pastor-teacher, but guarding the integrity and soundness of his teaching is of paramount importance.

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.

Hebrews 13:7 NKJV

8. The Authority of the Pastor-Teacher

Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity.

1st Timothy 4:12 NKJV

This verse does much to explain one of the pastor-teacher's most uncomfortable dilemmas. On the one hand, he is never to allow those to whom he ministers to disrespect his authority as a teacher and a leader – not out of ego or privilege, but out of the pressing need to defend the truth of the Word of God. There will always be some in any congregation, it seems, who will use whatever means are at hand as leverage for disrespect. In Timothy's case, his youth was an obvious "reason" to find him wanting, and Paul is very direct at telling him – and his congregation through putting this in writing – not to have any of it. The Lord puts pastor-teachers in place and He can remove them whenever *He* pleases. But until He does, once installed the congregation owes their pastor-teacher due honor and respect for his authority, whether they like him or not, whether they are happy with him or not.

Removing a pastor for malfeasance is certainly appropriate. Undercutting his authority when there is no question of any such thing is dangerous – for the believer who attempts it (cf. Num.12:1-16) – and harmful to the congregation as a whole. That is because the pastor-teacher is the one who feeds the sheep; but if the sheep come to doubt him, they will inevitably come to doubt his teaching as well, and only truth which is *believed* is of any benefit to the listener. The pastor-teacher and the Word of God are not identical – clearly – but they are inextricably associated. After all, the reason that this congregation has come together is to learn the truths of the Word of God from this pastor-teacher. Therefore while it is perfectly legitimate for any member of the congregation to pull up stakes and find another teacher at any time and for any reason, what is not legitimate is the waging of any sort of campaign against the authority of the teacher. That is deadly, for the pastor, for the congregation, and for the person who attempts it.

So whether it is youth (as in Timothy's case) or style of presentation (as in Paul's case):

2Cor.10:10), or wrongly censured behavior (as in Moses' case: Num.12:1-2), or education, background, credentials, personality or any other non-censurable matter, the time to take such things into consideration is *before* calling a pastor to the leadership/teaching position, or *before* entering into lasting fellowship with the group he teaches and leads. Afterwards, wordless and non-judgmental departure is the only option possible which may avoid divine discipline; and of course this action will deprive the one leaving of the Bible teaching he/she was receiving, unnecessarily so if the reasons for leaving were actually superficial and not well-founded.

Speak these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no one despise you.
Titus 2:15

On the other hand, while the principle expressed here and at 1st Timothy 4:12 above is straightforward enough, the *means* by which the pastor-teacher is told to enforce it are not so simple. Paul tells Timothy to "lead by example" in the former passage, and that is the essence of what he tells Titus just above as well. The pastor's teaching will be the main means of bringing the congregation around in cases of disrespect. But how much "rebuking" is he allowed and how strong should it be? This is the other side of the coin. Just as the congregation, if acting right before the Lord, needs to restrain themselves from disrespecting the pastor-teacher's authority, so the pastor must deal with his congregation in sufficient love and gentleness so as not to alienate them or cause them to be demoralized. In other words, the pastor-congregation relationship is very much like the parent-child relationship or a husband-wife relationship. Each side must have due consideration for the feelings and needs of the other, and the relationship will only work and not become dysfunctional if that is true. Scripture tells children to obey their parents (Eph.6:1-3; Col.3:20), and parents not to go overboard with disciplining their children (Eph.6:4; Col.3:21). Scripture tells wives to obey their husbands (Eph.5:24; Col.3:18; 1Pet.3:1), and husbands to act in love towards their wives (Eph.5:25; Col.3:19). But in both analogies, the Bible deliberately counsels the power in authority to refrain from using that authority in a tyrannical way, directing parents and husbands to earn their respect by a good example, and strongly suggesting that direct imposition of authority must be used most sparingly. How much more is that not true of the pastor-congregation relationship where the individual members are free to leave at the drop of a hat? For that reason, members of any congregation have to be doubly attentive to the authority principle, precisely because – unlike families and marriages – the pastor-teacher really has no means of enforcing what is rightfully his, beyond persuasion and setting a good example.

Nevertheless, the pastor-teacher must always remember that he does indeed possess the authority given by Christ Himself as an under-shepherd of the Great Shepherd, authority given as a means and a tool for protecting the flock of Jesus Christ. Therefore he must have no fear of what his congregation may think or say or do – or any opponents of his teaching from the outside (2Tim.1:7); but he must instead never lose sight of the awesome responsibility he has received from the One who is to be completely revered (e.g., Deut.10:12; Ps.34:9; Prov.9:10; 2Cor.5:11).

Let those elders who lead well be held worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the Word and in teaching.
1st Timothy 5:17

The way that the pastor-teacher establishes his authority and gains the respect of his congregation is through his teaching. If a pastor-teacher is diligent in his studying and teaching of the Word of God, the Lord will provide him with a group of believers who value his sacrifice and appreciate his offerings. Just as a father who is fair and loving in every good way will gain the respect of his children beyond what they are obligated to give (provided they are good children), and just as a husband who treats his wife with love and kindness will gain the respect of his wife beyond what she is obligated to provide (if she is a good woman), so a pastor-teacher who genuinely fulfills his obligation of feeding his sheep will gain their reverence and respect – if they are a godly group.

There are of course many cases in Israel of prophets being unappreciated (not to mention the apostles and even our Lord: Matt.13:54-58; Mk.6:1-6; Jn.6:60; 3Jn.1:9-11), but we also note that while the nation as a whole was often rebellious or even apostate, there was always a remnant who loved the Lord and who responded to the prophet's teaching. Just so, the Lord will provide listeners to any man who has the gift of pastor-teacher, who has prepared to use that gift, and who in the execution of his responsibilities answers the Lord's call to "feed My sheep" (Jn.21:15-17). These zealous believers may be few in number, poor in terms of worldly wealth, and "nothing" in the eyes of the world (1Cor.1:26-29), but they will be beloved of the Lord – and of the pastor as well; a good match even as children who are a blessing to their parents, and a husband and wife who exemplify Christian love. And where there is such love, authority seldom has to be exercised in any stern or unpleasant way.

For even if I should boast somewhat more about our authority, which the Lord gave us for edification and not for your destruction, I shall not be ashamed.
2nd Corinthians 10:8 NKJV

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.
Hebrews 13:17 NKJV

As these passages make clear, while the Church Age has seen plenty of abuses of this principle, having respect for the authority of one's pastor-teacher's is not a bad thing in and of itself, neither is the recognition that while Bible reading is invaluable, personal study of scripture is no substitute for substantive Bible teaching which only an orthodox teaching ministry can provide. That said, it is definitely a characteristic of cults to inculcate their followers to have nothing whatsoever to do with any other ministry or group, and to wrongly insist on an extreme level of respect for their leader as a prerequisite for fellowship beyond anything authorized by scripture. So while the principle that the congregation ought to respect the pastor's authority is biblical, and while it is also certainly true that refusing to believe what is taught will vitiate spiritual growth, pastoral authority is a prerogative which has very often been abused. Respect is something which congregants ought to be allowed to decide to give based on their appreciation of the quality of the teaching without having it over-aggressively imposed from above. It ought to be earned by the quality and quantity of good teaching which the pastor supplies.

9. Selection of a Pastor-Teacher

Don't [appoint] a novice [as pastor], lest his head swell and he fall under the [same judgment as] the devil.

1st Timothy 3:6

"Don't place your hands upon anyone quickly (i.e., to install them in an office), don't [by so doing] share in the sins of others. Keep yourself holy."

1st Timothy 5:22

In addition to all of the positive attributes discussed above, the passages quoted here are important for any group to keep in mind before installing any man as their pastor-teacher. Some experience in living the Christian life well and having fought the fight for Jesus Christ without having faltered under pressure is legitimate for the congregation to desire. All new Christians are eventually tested, and pastor-teachers are tested like no others. Paul notes that being led astray by the authority and prestige of this position is a particular attack which the devil is wont to use – and one which untested believers are unlikely to weather well. For that reason, making doubly sure of the choice ahead of time – as the second passage counsels – is a salutary policy. A pastor-teacher who comes up "through the ranks" of the group in question will thus be more easily vetted, but as in all things, the proof will eventually be "in the pudding". What is needed beyond all else is a man who has the gift, the ability and the commitment to "feed My sheep".

C. Organization and Functions of the Local Church

1. Government of the Local Church

The end of all apostolic rule and of the miracles and miraculous gifts which had attended it meant that thereafter Church as we are experiencing it today has had to become totally dependent upon the less spectacular (though intrinsically more powerful) procedure of administering the Word of God entirely through the Bible and the concomitant gifts of empowerment given by the Holy Spirit. For from the first days of the Ephesian era right up until our present time, the work of the Church, salvation and spiritual growth, has been accomplished exclusively through ordinary Christians who have not possessed such impressive and extraordinary gifts as was the case during the early days of the apostles (as covered in section I.B.5 above). It has not been through healing, or tongues, or apostolic authority, or any other overtly miraculous means that the Church has spread the message of Jesus Christ and provided for its own growth in the power of the Spirit (Col.2:19; Eph.4:16), but through normal evangelism, and teaching and pastoring, and all of the myriad helps that each individual member of the Body of Christ has provided in support of the fundamental goal of the Church: to grow in Christ and to help others do likewise (Jn.21:15-17).

The true importance of the historical development of the rituals, administrative functions, and various polities of the church-visible has generally been highly overrated (at least as far as *positive* influence is concerned). Certainly, some basic administrative structure was and still is necessary for local churches to serve our Lord "decently and in good order" (1Cor.14:40; cf. 1Cor.14:33).

But it can be fairly argued (as is obvious from even a superficial perusal of "Church history") that an over-enthusiastic, one might even say, morbid concentration on the forms of government and ritual have done far more harm than good in the past two millennia, and for one obvious reason: they have tended to attract attention to themselves rather than to the Word of God.

Jesus Christ Himself gave us the ceremony of communion (Matt.26:26-28; Mk.14:22-24; Lk.22:17-20; 1Cor.11:23-26), a ritual of remembrance of Him and His work and the only true Christian ritual, and even this has been abused – for its true purpose is not to "impart" grace or fellowship or anything else, but to remind believers of Him and His work and the choice we have made to follow Him. And as to the government of the local church, all the evidence points to the conclusion that flexibility of form in the implementation of the guiding principle of "decently and in good order" is what the scriptures enjoin. There is no evidence in the Bible for any administrative superstructure superior to the local church – denominations – following the (temporary) ministry of the twelve apostles.

As we have seen above, Paul goes to some lengths to describe the qualifications of deacons and of pastor-teachers and elders (1Tim.3:1-13; Tit.1:5-9), but gives no suggestions about how these are to further organize their churches. Peter says nothing on the subject at all, and John in particular, although the last of the apostles, is most deferential in the use of his own authority, even in some very taxing circumstances (cf. 3rd John). We may compare the situation that confronted Moses in the organization of early Israel (Ex.18:13-26). Although he would be given the most specific guidance on many subjects in very great detail, administration was something that demanded flexibility as to time and circumstances, so that it fell to the lot of his gentile father-in-law to suggest better arrangements (Ex.18:13-26) – decent arrangements for the good at that time, but *not* commanded by God (as the Law and so many other statutes certainly were).

One key reason for government is to prevent abuse of those in church by one another or from those outside.

(28) Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the Church of God, which he bought with his own blood. (29) I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. (30) Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. (31) So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

Acts 20:28-31

The parameters of this study require that we give some attention to what the Bible has to say on these topics, but it is important to start with the caveat, therefore, that in the history of the church-visible, far too much attention has been paid to these subjects (with great accretion of non-biblical and all too often also anti-biblical additions), with far too little attention paid to feeding the Body of Christ through the substantive teaching of the Word of God.

a. Apostles

There were only ever twelve apostles:

Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Revelation 21:14

So there are no apostles today. The word means "one sent", and so it is sometimes employed in the New Testament for what we today call "missionaries" (e.g., Rom.16:7; 2Cor.8:23; Phil.2:25; cf. the 72 "sent forth" by the Lord at Lk.10:1), based on the Latin word for "send" rather than the Greek one.

(11) Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (12) in order *to prepare* all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be built up . . .

Ephesians 4:11-12

Apostleship, one of the four teaching-related gifts listed by Paul above, entailed all of the characteristics of the other three, namely, prophecy, evangelism, and teaching, along with a special endowment of authority. As is clear from the book of Acts and from the epistles, these gifts and this authority were essential to empower the apostles to initiate, organize, teach and direct the early churches (these are the "keys" of Matt.16:19; cf. 2Cor.10:8; 13:10). The apostles made converts, established churches, taught the truth, wrote scripture, and guided the incipient organization of the Church militant expanding beyond its Jewish roots. No such specially authoritative gift has been given since the passing of the twelve because no such combination of gifts has been needed after they had laid the foundation for the Church we see today – and after they (and a few associated with them) had completed the New Testament.

Apostolic authority came directly from the Lord Jesus Christ. He appointed the eleven (Mk.3:14; Lk.6:13), along with Judas. And He appointed Judas' replacement, the apostle Paul.

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man [Paul] is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel."

Acts 9:15 NIV

(14) Then he said: "The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. (15) You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard."

Acts 22:14-15 NIV

And he said to me, "Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles."

Acts 22:21 NIV

"Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of Me."

Acts 26:16 NIV

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?

1st Corinthians 9:1 NIV

I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles.

2nd Corinthians 12:12 NIV

Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.

Galatians 1:1 NIV

Paul was appointed by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, as the verses above demonstrate, and He had seen the Lord personally, with the Lord appearing to him alone (and on more than one occasion: Acts 22:17-21). And Paul was given to display the "marks of a true apostle" (2Cor.12:12). Others may have seen the Lord, but He appeared to no one else personally to appoint them to the position of apostle, and there is no biblical evidence of anyone other than the twelve – of which number Paul is most certainly number twelve – demonstrating the signs of apostolic authority.

(9) For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (10) But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all (i.e., the other eleven), yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

1st Corinthians 15:9-10 NKJV

Given the above claim, sanctified by the Spirit, and given the unquestionably impressive record of evangelizing and production of scripture, "more than they all", if anyone else would have had the right or the reason to claim to be a pope, it would have been Paul (not Peter). Yet we find Paul ever deferential in his use of this special apostolic authority (cf. Gal.2:1-10; 1Thes.2:5-7), being always more concerned with the growth and the health of the Body of Christ than his own ego or well-being. Peter and John, the two other greatest of the apostles, likewise demonstrate comparable deference and tact in the use of their own God-given authority (e.g., 2Pet.3:14-16; 3Jn.1:9-12). This is a good lesson for us all, and it puts the lie to any church's claim of their leader having supervening authority over other churches (let alone *all* churches).

(2) As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." (3) Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

Acts 13:2-3 NKJV

As we have seen previously in this study, the apostolic period, the inaugural period of the New

Testament Church was different from what we have today, with the Holy Spirit directing things in an overtly miraculous way that does not presently apply. Entrusting the leadership of the Church to the twelve uniquely gifted individuals, who collectively give their name to that era, for the purpose of establishing the pattern meant to endure throughout the Church Age's two millennia, was definitely part and parcel of that difference.

b. Pastor-Teachers and Elders

While the scriptural teachings about apostles are historical (i.e., they do not have direct practical application today in regard to the organization of local churches because there are no more apostles), the gift and more particularly the office of pastor-teacher / elder is at the heart of everything any true church of Jesus Christ does. Pastor-teachers / elders provide the local church with its leadership and with its edification, with the former meant to enhance and protect the latter (at least in Christ's economy, even if that is a rare thing to observe in our present Laodicean day).

We have covered the gift of pastor-teacher in detail above (section II.B). What concerns us here is the appointment of these leaders of the local church and their role in the governance of it.

First, any organization needs leadership. For the local church, that leadership is provided by the elders. An elder is, literally, an "old man", and the New Testament uses a variety of words to describe these individuals: elder, a title stressing the respect due him (*presbyteres* or *presbyteros*: Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1Tim.5:1-2; 5:17-19; Tit.1:5; Tit.2:2; Jas.5:14; 1Pet.5:1; 5:5), pastor, a title stressing his role in caring for the sheep of his congregation (*poimen* < *poimaino*: Acts 20:28; 1Pet.5:2), teacher (*didaskalos*: 1Cor.12:28; 1Tim.2:7; 2Tim.1:11; Jas.3:1; cf. Acts 13:1 1Tim.3:2; 2Tim.2:2; 2:24; Tit.1:9; cf. Mal.2:7), pastor-teacher (*poimen kai didaskalos*: Eph.4:11), overseer or "bishop", a title which combines the pastor's oversight role with the authority necessary to carry it out (*episkopos* / *episkope* / *episkopeo*: 1Tim.3:1-2; 1Pet.5:2). What all of these terms have in common is their description of leaders who are worthy of respect and who are responsible for leading the congregation through their authoritative teaching.

Much ink has been spilled in evangelical circles over the issue of "plurality of elders". There are two important points to observe about the question of whether a local church should have only one elder who teaches, or a plurality of elders who govern – or both: 1) The fact that this issue is not made crystal clear in the New Testament is not an accident. When it comes to administration generally, there must be a measure of flexibility to account for differing times and circumstances – and for the size of the local church in question. In the same way that the Mosaic Law spells out many things in great detail, yet did not enjoin the specifics regarding how the nation of Israel was to be administered (Ex.18:13-26), in like fashion the New Testament makes the issue of truth absolute, but leaves local church administration a matter of applying those principles of truth "decently and in order" (1Cor.14:40); 2) The effect of the above along with the inherent nature of all human organizations has meant that a loose adoption of the Jewish synagogue model has been the rule throughout the Church Age from the time of the apostles until the present day – at least, that is, for independent local churches which are truly fulfilling God's purpose for them: namely, a

group of men or board who provide the governance for the local church, led by a "first among equals" (equivalent to the "ruler of the synagogue") who provides the leadership. Different from the synagogue model, however, is the fact that the head-elder or pastor establishes his leadership and his authority through his teaching of the Word of God.

How the pastor and elders are chosen, just what the balance of authority is, whether or not others besides the teaching elder can also teach the congregation, and all manner of related questions that may arise are issues for each local church to decide independently in cooperation with their leadership (and the decisions taken on each score may change as circumstances do, e.g., the size of the church). But the essential fact remains that all genuine local churches (after attaining some size, at any rate) have a governing council of some sort (the elders), and one man who takes the lead in teaching the congregation (the pastor).

If anyone speaks, he should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.
1st Peter 4:11 NASB

We have covered above (section II.B) the issue of qualifications for elders and pastors, and have already affirmed the awesome responsibility these offices entail – especially for the one teaching the Word of God. For it is the Word of God that truly shepherds the sheep, and only by teaching it fully, truthfully, diligently, and regularly can any pastor-teacher hope to do his job correctly before the Lord and keep his sheep out of trouble and moving forward.

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.
Hebrews 13:7 NKJV

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.
Hebrews 13:17 NKJV

This last passage in particular brings up the important point that congregations form to learn the truth, and install pastors who are capable teaching them (at least *de facto* by their attendance at Bible teaching). There is little point, therefore, in having a pastor-teacher and attending a church where one is actually teaching the Word if a person is unwilling to accept that pastor's teaching authority. Only what is true can produce spiritual growth – and only if it is *believed*.⁴⁸ Pastor-teachers should thus be afforded "double honor" from their congregations in recognition of the critical nature of their role in teaching the Word, and their good hard work in carrying it out (1Tim.5:17).

⁴⁸ See BB 4B: Soteriology: the Study of Salvation, section II.6., "Faith Epistemology".

. . . God has composed the human body in such a way as to give greater honor to the parts that are in short supply (analogous to teaching gifts).

1st Corinthians 12:24b

(12) Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. (13) Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.

1st Thessalonians 5:12-13a NIV

Other issues involved with the office of pastor-teacher / teaching elder / overseer or bishop are likewise to be handled with flexibility. While denominations in particular have voluminous rules and procedures for preparing and "ordaining" pastors, "calling" them to pastor individual churches, and "installing" them once they have been selected, the Bible has little or nothing to say about any of these matters (and denominations, as we have seen, are not biblically sanctioned).⁴⁹

Local churches are thus free to do as they please when it comes to picking a teacher, as long as they proceed in a godly and respectable way (1Cor.14:40; cf. 1Cor.14:33; Col.2:5). In point of fact, however, if congregations were proceeding in a truly biblical fashion, putting the teaching of the Word of God before all else, positive believers would tend to follow genuine teachers of the Word as a rule (rather than the other way around). The second generation of any church (especially those who have become tethered to a physical structure) seldom shows the same dedication to the truth, so that however a new pastor is called, the most common outcome in such cases historically has been little further progress, whether from poor response, poor teaching or more likely from much of both. But if positive believers are ever willing to "vote with their feet" and seek out the best Bible teaching they can find, it will more often be a matter of the congregation coming to the pastor-teacher – at least in terms of churches where good things are actually happening.

Finally, while the pastor-teacher and any other elders have authority over the congregation to expel after due process members who refuse to reform their behavior if found to be involved in overt and outrageous activities (cf. 1Cor.5:1-13 and Jas.5:14-16, where elders are called in because the sickness is related to divine discipline), they do not themselves possess immunity on this score. Pastor-teachers and other elders who are caught in serious indiscretion must likewise be adjudged in a responsible way by the rest of the leadership, rebuked if found guilty – and publicly so in their case – and expelled from their positions if they refuse to reform.

"Do not accept an accusation against a pastor/elder unless in the case of two or three

⁴⁹ The apostles were given the unique ability to mediate the Holy Spirit through the "laying on" of their hands (e.g., Acts 8:18), but no one has this power today. Paul's directive to Timothy not to "lay hands on anyone hastily" (1Tim.5:22) is metaphorical for not making any public declaration of support for anyone before they have been tested and does not refer to any mandatory procedure.

witnesses. Those who have sinned in the presence of all [the congregation] rebuke in order that the rest may [also] have fear."

1st Timothy 5:19-20

c. Deacons

(2) So [because of problems with the distribution of food to the widows as the church increased] the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry (*diakonia*) of the word of God in order to wait on tables. (3) Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them (4) and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry (*diakonia*) of the word."

Acts 6:2-4 NIV

The word "deacon" (Gr. *diakonos*) means "servant" or "minister", and in the passage above we can see that it was chosen to correspond to the proper service of pastor-teachers and elders, namely, the "service" and ministry of the Word of God. Scripture thus recognizes the need for administrative helpers in local churches (especially if they have grown to a certain point), and specifies that these be qualified by their character and behavior before being allowed to serve in an official capacity (1Tim.3:8-13).

In the passage quoted above, Acts 6:2-4, we see that this appointment of the seven original deacons of the Jerusalem church took place "when the number of the disciples was multiplying" and when problems of improper administration arose as a result. Similarly, when Paul discusses their qualifications in 1st Timothy 3:8-13, there is no command or injunction to the effect that deacons *must* be appointed (as by contrast was the case with elders: Tit.1:5). We glean from this that when local churches grow in number to the point where formal administrative help is necessary, 1) that it is legitimate to choose and appoint such officers, "deacons"; 2) that the biblical procedures for their selection must be followed; and 3) that as in the case in Acts chapter six, the pastor-teacher and elders are the ones to set the policies (along with whatever input from the congregation and through whatever process the local church has decided upon), and the deacons then carry it out.

Besides that of pastor-teacher/elder, the office of deacon, moreover, is the *only* other biblically sanctioned one, and is designed to assist in making the church run smoothly. That is the role of those chosen as deacons: they do not have primary oversight in either teaching or church governance (i.e., they "serve" as opposed to teaching and guiding; cf. Acts 6:1-6; Phil.1:1; 1Tim.3:8-13).

d. Apostolic Era Gifts

(8) Love never falls [into inactivity]. But whether [we are talking about gifts of] prophecy, they will cease, or about [gifts of] tongues, they will come to a stop, or [about the gift of] knowledge, it will be done away with. (9) For when we exercise the gift of knowledge, its

results are only partial. And when we exercise the gift of prophecy, its results are only partial. (10) But when what is complete shall have come on the scene (i.e., the completed Bible available to a mature Church), all partial measures shall be done away with.

1st Corinthians 13:8-10

"That which is complete" or "the perfect" in verse ten above is, of course, the completed canon of scripture, the Bible, the Word of God. As we have seen earlier in this study, things were markedly different during apostolic times, and there were good reasons for that. Transitioning the Church from a nation-state centered witness where the entire people of Israel were supposed to follow the Lord to a worldwide community of faith with believers of all races interspersed among the gentiles was not an overnight development. This remarkable change – an absolutely appropriate one in the shift from the anticipation of the cross and the resurrection to its fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ – required time and special gifts to bring about. It also required the New Testament wherein Christ is no longer merely foreshadowed as in the Old but fully revealed. These scriptures (in combination with the Old Testament scriptures they explain) would serve as the anchor, the bedrock, for the faith and practice of every local church throughout the world where Christ would genuinely be sought. The apostles were key to this transition, both in their evangelizing, forming and administering of the new churches, and also critically in their penning and oversight of the completion of the canon of the New Testament (under the direction and inspiration of the Holy Spirit).

In between the first Pentecost of the Church Age, where this fundamental change in the dispensation of God's truth was initiated, with the New Testament completed and distributed among now fully established local churches possessed of gifted and prepared Bible teachers, we find the special gifts mentioned in 1st Corinthians 13:8-10 above (and others) being given and empowered to fill the gap between the way truth was disseminated during the Age of Israel and the way it is now being shared and has been throughout the bulk of the Church Age. During the period of transition, tongues were given and were helpful for evangelizing new communities (as well as for edifying local churches *if* someone with the gift of interpretation happened to be present); the gift of prophecy was a direct channel of truth from the Lord to edify believers with Church Age doctrine not yet to be found in the scriptures so far available; the temporary spiritual gifts of wisdom, knowledge and faith (to be carefully distinguished from the wisdom, knowledge and faith every mature believer in Christ should possess and manifest) were likewise given to provide insight into the truth in local churches where as yet there was no prepared pastor-teacher (given the need to form a great many churches immediately in the wave of apostolic evangelism which swept the world of that time). But when these special transitional needs melted away, so did these and similar temporary spiritual gifts (apostleship included).⁵⁰ The Spirit ceased to give them because they were no longer necessary, and because their continuation would have undermined the authority structure ordained for the major part of the Church Age: the gifted and prepared pastor-teacher edifying his congregation through the teaching of the truth of the Word of God as revealed in the completed holy Bible.

⁵⁰ See BB 5: Pneumatology, section II.B.3.d.1.c, "Temporary Gifts".

That being the case, any group which claims to speak in tongues, or anyone who claims prophetic inspiration so as to be a source of "truth" independent of the Bible, or the ability to heal by touch or accomplish any sort of miracle of their own volition ought to be avoided like the plague. None of these things are happening presently nor have they happened since the passing of the last apostle – at least not through the power of God.

(13) For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. (14) And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. (15) Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.
2nd Corinthians 11:13-15 NKJV

e. Membership

All who believe in Jesus Christ, all who have faith unto salvation in His perfect person and work on the cross, are members of His Church, the eternal assembly which is being formed on earth and will rise as one on the day of His glorious return. We who believe belong to the Church of Jesus Christ, an association we share with every person who has ever placed their faith in the dear Lord who bought us with His own blood on Calvary's cross. We do not need any sort of earthly membership in any particular local church (let alone in any denomination) in order to grow spiritually, and certainly not to be saved. The issue of formal church membership is not even addressed in the Bible, while denominations are not biblically sanctioned and have certainly proven more of a hindrance to the kingdom of God than a help over the course of the Church Age. Moreover, any group which teaches that membership is necessary for salvation or spiritual growth is fighting against the truth, and any individual who believes these falsehoods is in spiritual danger.⁵¹

The Bible does not prohibit local churches from establishing a formal system of membership, nor does it forbid local churches forming relationships with other churches or even formalizing such associations. However, the harm caused by the latter throughout the Church Age is indisputable, while the potential and actual abuse connected with the former has also been widespread.

As things stand today, there is very little need for denominations. It may have been possible to argue in the past that on occasion such associations were needful, as in the banding together of reformed churches to resist annihilation by hostile Roman Catholicism, or in providing a support network for the training and support of pastors and missionaries. As things stand today, however, in terms of the former issue the threats to biblical Christianity are not as much physical as they are spiritual, and rise more from within than from without. Denominationalism today is acting more as a brake against acceptance of the truth than as a bulwark against its enemies, and inasmuch as

⁵¹ The belief that one's salvation or growth is in any way dependent upon church or denominational membership is dangerous to the extent that a person relies on said membership for any measure of spiritual security. See Peter #27, "Three False Doctrines that Threaten Faith".

almost all denominations have been so thoroughly infiltrated by one type of compromise with the world or another, those within them generally find themselves more under spiritual attack as a result of their membership than they are receiving any particular help to grow spiritually because of it. For the truth is most definitely not a denominational priority. That is an occupational hazard because of the inherent nature of any such organization, for all such groups always place institutional growth and survival above all else.

In terms of the latter, given the anemic language training offered by Protestant seminaries today, their hide-bound and denominationally tied theologies, and the resultantly compromised methods of interpretation they teach, any Christian with the gift of pastor-teacher desiring to prepare for ministry would be well-served to consider pursuing secular educational opportunities for Greek and Hebrew instead. Combined with a diligent and faithful adherence to a solid Bible teaching ministry, and with a deep personal commitment to developing all of the other tools necessary to teach the Bible effectively in depth, such an approach is virtually certain to produce a better result (and the same is true of those who find themselves called to missionary activity).

Individual local churches have even less justification for formalizing membership. Without this hindrance, if one of the fellowship desires to depart (or has to leave the geographical area for whatever reason), having no strings makes the process cleaner and smoother in every way. Likewise, any Christian who is attracted to the genuine teaching of the scriptures (which of course should be the goal and primary function of any local church), will be free to come and join in without making some sort of binding (and non-biblical) commitment. In such a case, truth – the desire for it and the teaching of it – will be what attracts and holds the fellowship together, rather than the inertia of traditional and formal commitment.

The reason, in spite of the benefits of foregoing it, that membership is nearly ubiquitous in local churches today has to do with the two banes of the church-visible: money and property.

f. Ownership of Property

(11) Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (12) in order to prepare all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be built up, (13) until we all reach that unifying [goal] of belief in and full-knowledge of the Son of God, that each of us might be a perfect person, that is, that we might attain to that standard of maturity of the fullness of Christ; (14) that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, (15) but rather that we may, by embracing the truth in love, grow up in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. (16) In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love.

Ephesians 4:11-16

As this passage affirms, the encouragement and mutual support of each other in a local assembly comes from the edification and spiritual growth provided by the teaching of the truth of the scriptures and by its reinforcement, one member to another, in the application of each one's spiritual gifts in response to that truth being learned, believed and applied in turn. This is the purpose of the local church, and nothing about it absolutely requires anything directly related to money or property.

It is true, of course, that most pastor-teachers are not independently wealthy, and for that reason scripture makes very clear that the first responsibility for any local church is to provide adequately for the man who is feeding them with the truth (covered below in section II.C.2.b). How and to what extent this is done will depend on many factors, but neither formal membership nor official pledging of future contributions (let alone "tithing" which is not even legitimate for the Church Age as documented previously) are necessary to provide some measure of pastoral support.

Clearly, it is a natural human tendency to desire a measure of worldly security, such as a specified salary, benefits and some measure of tenure, and those who have committed to being pastor-teachers can be forgiven for wanting these things as can their congregations for desiring to provide for them. Nor is this wrong per se. But it must be understood and accepted that proceeding in this direction will require formal membership, and pledging, and, as growth occurs, the concomitant desire for a dedicated building, resulting in spin-off congregations, and, eventually to all such enterprises which attain such "success" in the world's terms, all the trappings of a denomination.

If in following this path the genuine biblical purpose of the local church were to be retained, namely, of providing a venue for spiritual growth in the truth and mutual encouragement and edification through the interaction of the gifts of members within that church, then all would be well. The problem is, however, when the bureaucratic processes and the buildings and the institution itself become the focus of the groups efforts – as inevitably occurs – the genuine love for and search for the truth from the Word tends to decline to a proportional degree until it eventually evaporates altogether. People love to "do things"; they love to "build things". But growing closer to Jesus Christ through the truth, following Him in truth, and helping others to do the same is hard for most Christians and impossible for unbelievers. But even an unbeliever can join a church, participate in the growing rituals or emotional and theatrical performances added to substitute for a lack of truth, give money and work and strive – and be well thought of . . . by that church (that is the history of Roman Catholicism and of far too many Protestant denominations as well).

Given basic legalities of property ownership, it would be very difficult if not impossible for any local church to possess a dedicated building for its meetings without establishing formal membership and incorporation. And it likewise would not be easy to "hire" a pastor-teacher without a similar set of rules and regulations. Every church should set itself to doing things "decently and in order" (1Cor.14:40), but it must be understood that if this is taken to mean formalizing membership, legally contracting with a pastor-teacher, and committing to

constructing a church building, it is a very rare thing for these practical challenges not to overwhelm and subsume the group's original dedication to the teaching of the truth of the Word of God. So while membership, collective property ownership, and formalized associations may not be prohibited by scripture, the dangers of such changes ought at least to be taken into account ahead of time by any small group meeting in a private home and being taught by a good man who is sacrificing his time while working a day-job as well. If the will of God is being accomplished and spiritual growth is occurring, is all that worth risking out of a desire for something larger, more formal, and more "successful" – in the eyes of the world alone?

g. Discipline

(34) "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. (35) For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; (36) and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' (37) He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. (38) And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. (39) He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it."

Matthew 10:34-49 NKJV

In the main, church discipline, the meting out of punitive measures upon members of the church fellowship by the leadership and/or congregation in general, will be unnecessary – for any local church, that is, which is putting the teaching of the truth of the Word at the forefront. That is because the truth is, as in the passage above, inherently divisive, and will tend to drive away all who are either unbelievers, or not really interested in the truth, or not willing to respond to the truth in sanctification and spiritual growth (cf. Jn.6:60-66). At least that will be the case for those churches where the Word of God and its teaching in depth and detail is the prime reason for assembly.

(4) In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, (5) deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

1st Corinthians 5:4-5 NKJV

On rare occasions, as in the above situation in Corinth, someone will be led by the devil to test the pastor and the congregation's resolve by overtly engaging in some sort of outrageous behavior. If it is a case of a genuine believer doing things that call reproach upon him/herself and the congregation as a whole, insulting the Name of Christ in so doing, said person must be expelled from fellowship if unresponsive to private warnings from the leadership (cf. 1Tim.5:1; 5:20).

(15) "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. (16) But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' (17) If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen

even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."
Matthew 18:15-17 NIV

But if it is a case of false Christians, unbelievers entering into the fellowship with ulterior purposes, set on preying upon the sheep who are not on their guard because these wolves have donned sheep's clothing, then all such must be expelled by the leadership outright and with dispatch.

(28) Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. (29) I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. (30) Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. (31) So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears."
Acts 20:28-31 NIV

Pastor-teachers and other elders are responsible to the Lord for what they teach and do, and that is an awesome thing to contemplate (Jas.3:1). For this reason, disciplinary proceedings against the leadership of the group should be undertaken only in extreme situations, for they are the Lord's servants and it is to Him that they "stand or fall" (Rom.14:4; cf. Num.12:1-15); but scripture does anticipate the possibility of a pastor-teacher or any of the governing elders of a church being caught out in gross misbehavior, and does provide a policy for that situation:

(19) Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. (20) Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all [the congregation], that the rest also may fear.
1st Timothy 5:19-20 NKJV

2. Legitimate Functions of the Local Church

a. Edification

Let all things be done for edification.
1st Corinthians 14:26b NKJV

(24) And let us give careful attention to one another[*'s ministries*] as motivation for [our own] love and good works, (25) not abandoning your mutual assembling as some have made it their practice to do [and which makes this impossible], but rather encouraging each other [to persevere in this work of the Lord], and doing so to an ever greater degree to the extent that you see the day [of the Lord] drawing [ever] closer.
Hebrews 10:24-25

Edification, spiritual growth, is the purpose of Christian assembly, accomplished mainly through the teaching of the Word of God but also, as in the second passage above, through the mutual

ministries of each member for the "growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Eph.4:16 NKJV; cf. 1Cor.14:26-40; Col.2:19; Heb.10:24-25).

Ever since the cessation of temporary edification gifts at end of the apostolic period, however, the main burden for providing the spiritual nutrition necessary for the congregation to grow has fallen upon the shoulders of the pastor-teacher. For learning the truth is the most important priority for any Christian church worthy of the name, since it is only through understanding and believing the truths of scripture that spiritual growth, progress and resultant production can ever occur.

(32) And a multitude was sitting around Him; and they said to Him, "Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You." (33) But He answered them, saying, "Who is My mother, or My brothers?" (34) And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! (35) For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother."

Mark 3:32-35 NKJV

In the passage above, those who came to hear our Lord teach the truth – and especially those who listened carefully and committed what He said to their hearts by faith – are the ones "doing the will of God". Thus has it ever been. Christian service and good works have their place, but obedience to the truth – hearing it, believing it, and putting it into practice in one's walk with the Lord through this dark world – is the proper foundation of every Christian life and for that reason the fundamental purpose of all Christian assembly (with all genuine Christian service and good works only fully empowered in the case of those who adapt themselves to such obedience).

(39) Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. (39) And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. (40) But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me." (41) And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. (42) But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10:38-42 NKJV

The "one thing" and the "good part" is the teaching of the truths of the Word of God through which alone edification, spiritual growth, can take place. No Christian can grow without the truth; no Christian can become prepared to pass the tests that demonstrate spiritual maturity without the truth; and no Christian can come fully into the foreordained ministry which corresponds to the gifts he/she has been given without the truth. And, today, supplying that truth (Eph.4:16; Col.2:19) is mainly the responsibility of the pastor-teacher.

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep".

Without a pastor-teacher to feed the sheep, the members of the congregation cannot grow to any significant degree. If a local church is blessed to have such a man who is gifted and sufficiently prepared, "able to teach" (1Tim.3:2 2Tim.2:2; 2:24), and genuinely doing his best to provide spiritual food of substantial depth and in sufficient quantity, it certainly behooves the congregation to give him their encouragement, moral support, and obedience – that is, the benefit of the doubt in terms of any teachings with which they may have some initial disagreement (Tit.2:15; Heb.13:7; 13:17).

Unlike many religions, cults, and questionable "Christian" churches, it is not being suggested here that allegiance be granted to any Bible teacher or ministry without proper vetting, nor is it being suggested that respect and loyalty are not things which have to be earned – for scripture certainly indicates that they must be. Properly appreciated, the job of pastor-teacher is a great responsibility which needs to be prepared for and carried out with all due diligence and humility (1Cor.4:1; Gal.2:7; 1Thes.2:4; 1Tim.1:11; 6:20; Tit.1:3). Pastor-teachers are thus not "specially privileged people"; rather they are specially responsible to the Lord:

(25) Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles Lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. (26) Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, (27) and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – (28) 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."
Matthew 20:25-28 NIV

Pastor-teachers are the "good stewards" of the truth of the Word of God – or should be – bringing forth from the Bible and from the truths entrusted to them "things old and new" for the edification of Christ's Body (Matt.13:52). This is an awesome responsibility, as Paul certainly knew:

(1) Let [every] man evaluate us this way, namely, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. (2) Now what you are looking for in stewards, moreover, is that one be found who is faithful [to the Lord] (i.e., and therefore worthy of one's trust).
1st Corinthians 4:1-2

(10) For we must all stand before Christ's tribunal, so that each of us may receive recompense for what he has accomplished through this body, whether it be good or worthless. (11) Therefore since we know the fear of the Lord, while we attempt to persuade men, God sees us entirely for what we [truly] are – and I trust that what we [truly] are is equally clear to your consciences.
2nd Corinthians 5:10-11

For this reason, the scriptures which delineate the parameters of the pastor-teacher's job emphasize most heavily the responsibility he bears toward the Lord to do it right:

(13) Until I come, devote yourself to [public] reading [of the scriptures], to encouragement [through the Word], to the teaching [of the Word]. (14) Do not neglect the [spiritual] gift [of pastor-teacher] which belongs to you and which was given to you [by the Spirit], [and which was proclaimed] through prophecy [and recognized] by the laying on of the hands of the elders. (15) Be diligent in these things (i.e., studying and teaching the Word). Make them your primary concern so that your spiritual progress may be evident to all. (16) Apply them (i.e., the truths you learn) to yourself and to your teaching. Stick [faithfully] to them. For in so doing you will bring yourself and those who heed you safely home.
1st Timothy 4:13-16

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the Word of truth.
2nd Timothy 2:15 NIV

But as for you – model yourself on my teaching, my methodology, my plan of action, my faith, my endurance, my love, my perseverance . . .
2nd Timothy 3:10

Proclaim the Word! Keep at it, whether circumstances are favorable or not! Reprove, rebuke, [and] encourage with all patience [in your] teaching!
2nd Timothy 4:2

(7) In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness (8) and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.
Titus 2:7-8 NIV

(10) As each one has received a [particular spiritual] gift, [so let us be] ministering it to each other as good stewards of the multi-faceted grace of God. (11) If anyone communicates, let him do so as if he were speaking words directly from God.
1st Peter 4:10-11a

In short, a truly good pastor-teacher will be one who is eager to fulfill our Lord's thrice-given command to Peter to "feed My sheep" (Jn.21:15-17), providing them day by day with the spiritual nutrition necessary to grow, progress and produce for the Lord. More than credentials (which are important), more than experience (which is also important), and certainly more than personality, that consistency is the key quality and essential characteristic which someone really wanting to grow in Jesus Christ should search out when looking for a prospective pastor-teacher: love for the Lord manifest in love for His flock demonstrated by diligently and consistently providing for their true spiritual needs.

(36) When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (37) Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. (38) Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to

send out workers into his harvest field."

Matthew 9:36-38 NIV

(5) So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. (6) Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. (7) But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. (8) So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. (9) For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God. (10) You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; (11) as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, (12) that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

1st Thessalonians 2:5-12 NKJV

(1) To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: (2) Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; (3) not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

1st Peter 5:1-3 NIV

Fulfilling this awesome responsibility in the spirit commended by our Lord and His apostles requires discipline, dedication, energy and, above all, time. Is it wrong to ask the pastor-teacher to do weddings? To officiate at funerals? To visit parishioners in the hospital or in prison? To call on them at home? To attend and participate in all manner of other events and occasions? Scripture does not prohibit these things. But it is fair to point out that in order to provide for the edification of his church – the whole point of its existence and the essential ministry for which he is responsible to the Lord – the pastor-teacher needs time. If he is performing a marriage ceremony and attending the reception, he is not studying and teaching. If he is giving a eulogy and officiating at an interment, he is not studying and teaching. If he is calling at a hospital, prison or home, he is not studying and teaching. In short, if he is engaging in any of the wide range of activities many churches expect of their pastor, he is not studying and teaching. And his job – as unto the Lord for the benefit of the church – is studying and teaching the Word of God.

It is also fair to point out that any elder could reasonably perform any of these other functions – as could any spiritually mature member of the congregation (Jas.1:27; Heb.13:3). What does it say about a local church if the members care so little about their own spiritual growth that they cavalierly obligate their pastor's time with non-essential duties? What does it say about them if they allow this to happen when individually and collectively they could easily parcel out these non-teaching duties among themselves? If they are paying their pastor a living wage so that he is able to support himself and his family without "moonlighting", perhaps at least they have some

small fig-leaf of justification, especially if he signed on knowing of their misplaced priorities. But what if he is serving with only partial remittance or without pay whatsoever? In such cases, finding fault with a pastor-teacher who resists these non-essentials when he is content to wage this warfare without any stipend is even more culpable (cf. 1Cor.9:6-14). Any church which prizes its own spiritual growth beyond all else (as all churches certainly should) will take pains to avoid this traditional trap which is so easy for churches and pastors alike to fall into, and will have little patience with renegade members who always want to "make an exception" in their own cases.

(2) So [because of problems with the distribution of food to the widows as the church increased] the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "***It would not be right*** for us to ***neglect the ministry of the word of God*** in order to wait on tables. (3) Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them (4) and will give our attention to prayer ***and the ministry of the word.***"

Acts 6:2-4 NIV

b. Pastoral Support

Not only under the present dispensation of the truth but also of course during the Age of Israel support from the congregation for those doing the job the Lord called them to do was commanded to be provided (e.g., Lev.5:13; 7:6-10; Num.18:20-32; Deut.14:22-29; Amos 4:13; Lk.18:12; cf. Matt.10:10; Luke 10:7).

(13) Don't you know that those who officiate at the temple rituals eat from the temple? And that those who officiate at the altar have a share in the altar? (14) In the same way the Lord has also directed for those proclaiming the good news to live off of so doing. (15) But I have not made use of any of these rights. And I am not writing this so that such might be the case for me. I would rather die first! No one is going to take away this boast of mine (i.e., of offering you the truth free of charge)! (16) For if I proclaim the gospel (i.e., "the good news", the whole realm of kingdom truth), that is no basis for boasting since the necessity of doing so lies upon me – and woe to me if I do not proclaim it! (17) Now if I do this willingly, I do have a reward [to look forward to], but [even] if unwillingly, I still have a duty which has been entrusted to me to dispense [this truth]. (18) What then is my reward? That in proclaiming the [truth of the] good news I shall present it without [having to] charge [for it], so as not to make full use of the authority I have to do so [given to me in] the gospel [itself].

1st Corinthians 9:13-18 (cf. 2Cor.11:7-11)

All ministry requires personal sacrifice, but few ministries require the sort of sacrifices necessary to become a prepared and properly functioning pastor-teacher – because of the time and effort required to prepare in the first place and to prepare for each teaching session in the second place. Few men, however, find themselves in a position to be as dead set against receiving financial support as Paul was in the case of the ungrateful Corinthians (1Cor.9:15). For this reason, as Paul makes crystal clear in the passage above even in the process of refusing such aid from them (he

did, of course, receive support from, e.g., the Macedonians: Phil.4:15-18), supporting the pastor-teacher so that he may be able to devote his time and energies to the studying and teaching of the Word of God for the edification of his church is one major responsibility incumbent upon every local church.

(7) Who ever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock? (8) Do I say these things as a mere man? Or does not the law say the same also? (9) For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain." Is it oxen God is concerned about? (10) Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope. (11) If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things?

1st Corinthians 9:7-11 NKJV

In the same way the Lord has also directed for those proclaiming the good news (i.e., teaching the truth) to live off of so doing.

1st Corinthians 9:14

Let him who receives instruction in the Word share in all good things with him who gives instruction.

Galatians 6:6

(17) Let those elders who lead well be held worthy of *double honor*, especially those who labor in the Word and in teaching. (18) For the scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is threshing", and, "The worker is worthy of his pay".

1st Timothy 5:17-18

So while every congregation owes its pastor-teacher respect (1Thes.5:12-13; 1Tim.5:17; Heb.13:7; 13:17), prayer support (Rom.15:30; 2Cor.1:11; Phil.1:19; Philem.1:22), and encouragement (1Cor.16:17-18; 2Cor.7:4-7; 7:13; 2Tim.1:16; Philem.1:7), none of these relieve them of their responsibility to provide the other half of the "double honor" commanded in 1st Timothy 5:17 above, namely, a reasonable level of financial support – so as to liberate his time to do what he has been called to do.

Clearly, any pastor-teacher who is forming a group of believers into a fellowship for the first time cannot expect to be supported immediately, and certainly not to the point of relieving him of "waging war on his own resources" at least partially for some time to come. But as the church grows, it is right and proper for the congregation to increase their level of support proportionally. This does not mean that the salary of a pastor-teacher is to be considered open-ended and limitless. All things are to be done "decently and in order" (1Cor.14:40). As such, the rule of thumb one of my well-respected seminary professors suggested seems close to the mark: a congregation which is able to do so should consider paying their pastor the median income of its members; that way, he is neither above them (so as to be tempted to haughtiness) nor below the

others (so as to be subjected to bullying and contempt).

Embarking on the path of pastor-teacher requires courage, therefore. It takes sacrifice and serious investment before the fact to engage in the preparation necessary to be ready to teach the Word of God, and sacrifice and courage after starting or joining a small group where support is at first little or none and prospects indistinct. It also takes courage on the part of the congregation to commit to supporting a pastor-teacher (not to mention wisdom in selecting the right person in the case of "group first" situations, or joining oneself to the right fellowship in the case of "teacher first" situations). Both parties need to keep firmly in mind, moreover, that nothing is impossible for the Lord, and that for congregations and pastor-teachers who are doing things the right way, the biblical way, nothing is impossible.

(19) "When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments did you take up?" They said to Him, "Twelve." (20) "Also, when I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of fragments did you take up?" And they said, "Seven." (21) So He said to them, "How is it you do not understand?"
Matthew 8:19-21 NKJV

Any prospective pastor-teacher worth his salt would be thrilled at the prospect of being able to teach a group of believers who were truly eager to learn the truth from him, and would no doubt be willing to put up with a great deal on this score in order to do so. And any local church blessed to have such a man, truly willing and able to teach the Word of God in depth and orthodox detail, ought to be willing to do what is necessary to keep him.

(45) "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, (46) who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it."
Matthew 13:45-46 NKJV

c. Worship

The word "worship" as it actually occurs in the Bible represents for the most part the Hebrew word *shachah* and the Greek word *proskyneo*, both of which mean, literally, to bow down before a superior. They are both used metaphorically for acts of submission to the Lord wherein we come before Him to appreciate Him and do what He would have us to do.

And Abraham said unto his young men, "Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you."
Genesis 22:5 KJV

O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker.
Psalm 95:6 KJV

(21) "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." (21) Jesus saith unto her, "Woman, believe me, the hour

cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. (22) Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. (23) But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. (24) God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."
John 4:21-24 KJV

All of the passages above (along with numerous other instances in scripture) represent acknowledgment of the Lord as God through carrying out the sacrifices and ordinances He has commanded. In the Church Age, this is analogous to assembling together to learn the Word of truth (since we no longer make animal sacrifices to represent the truth of Christ's Sacrifice but have the full revelation of the cross in the New Testament).

So the way the word "worship" and the term "worship service" are employed in contemporary English are at some remove from the Bible. As we have seen above (in section II.A, "What a local church *may* do"), just as music was employed in Israel in praise of the Lord, so there is nothing in scripture to prohibit local churches today from utilizing music in their services. But it should be emphasized that 1) it is the words that are of utmost importance, so that care needs to be taken in any musical productions to ensure that these adhere entirely to the truth of the Word of God (all tradition predilections and "production values" aside); and 2) music must not be substituted for the true purpose of assembly, teaching and learning the Word of God.

Singing, prayer, praising the Lord, and other manifestations of biblical worship, that is, demonstrating our joy and love and submission to the Lord and His truth, while enjoyable are no substitutes for the hearing and learning of the truth – because it is only through the Holy Spirit mobilizing and utilizing that truth in our hearts that prayer and praise and song to the Lord can be meaningful at all.

d. Missions and Evangelism

(5) Beloved, you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers; (6) and they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. (7) For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. (8) Therefore we ought to support such men, so that we may be fellow workers with the truth.
3rd John 1:5-8 NASB

As these verses affirm, supporting other believers who take it upon themselves to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with others is a noble and biblically encouraged thing to do. In the case of the passage above, we would be hard pressed to say whether it is a case here of missionaries or evangelists – and in truth there is no discernible difference, biblical speaking. It is only in the way that these terms have evolved in our own culture that there is any difference: the way we express things, missionaries leave the country; evangelists do not; both are meant to spread the truth to those who have not yet accepted it. But wherever one goes to spread the Word of truth and to

whomever it is spread it is "giving the good news" (biblical "evangelism") and always benefits from being sent, helped along, or commissioned by various local churches (biblical "missions"). Other than supporting the man and his family who are feeding the congregation, and other than taking care of serious needs in the case of other members of the congregation, no other activity is more worthy of support by any local church. John's commentary above perfectly captures in the Spirit the laudable motives of those who go forth to bring others to the truth as well as the challenges and difficulties they face. Helping them on their way is blessed indeed.

It is another mark against denominations and the structure of the church-visible today generally that, in spite of the vast amounts of money given to provide for massive church buildings and their decoration, impressive technological and musical infrastructures, large and well-remunerated church staffs, most missionaries today are not fully supported, and what support they do receive has to be begged for by spending much time and effort touring local churches to garner some measure of assistance.

It should also be pointed out that what evangelists and missionaries are to do in biblical terms does not necessarily sync with the expectations of the church-visible today. "Evangelism" in biblical terms means not only leading to salvation but also providing for the spiritual growth of those who do respond through further instruction in the truth (just as Paul and his associates took pains to set up local churches in the areas evangelized, equipping them with elders able to teach); "missions" in biblical terms similarly does not mean providing physical improvements for those who are to benefit from the truth.

It takes no deep reading of, e.g., the book of Acts, to see that the pattern of "fire and forget" evangelism at home (where rallies may lead to salvation but then those saved are left in the lurch as far as providing the truth for further spiritual growth is concerned), and "better life" missions abroad (where improvement of the local physical plant and material conditions takes precedence over providing truth for further spiritual growth after initial contact), are both wide of the mark of what Paul and his associates routinely did. Bringing others to Christ and helping them grow spiritually thereafter requires building relationships based on the truth, and entails a commitment to continue to feed these new congregations once established (whether at home or abroad).

It seems therefore almost superfluous to point out that very short forays into either of these areas – which are brief *by design* – find no basis for support in scripture. If a believer has not been called to a life of missions and evangelism, there will always be plenty of opportunities to share the truth of the Word and to lead others forward in the truth right in the place where God has put each individual Christian without having to "hit the road" domestically or fly off to some foreign country to do so. He has put us where He has put us for a reason, after all.

e. Giving

Other than the three areas mentioned above, namely, supporting the pastor, caring for the needy in the congregation, and participating by way of contributions to the work of others in spreading the

good news, scripture does not anticipate any "common purse" to be utilized for other purposes.⁵² When Paul organized a special gift for the needy believers in Jerusalem, it came as a one-time appeal to the churches in Greece, and was fulfilled by individual donations (1Cor.16:1-4). Providing for the pastor-teacher, the needy, and, when the opportunity offers, helping those who have devoted their lives to spreading the truth will no doubt be more than enough of a load for the members of a small congregation to bear – if these three things be done with appropriate generosity (2Cor.9:6-11).

It is easy enough to foresee how that the decision to acquire property – a dedicated building for meeting – may easily supplant the ability of the group to accomplish sufficiently all three of the above legitimate giving-functions. Generally speaking, even in a fairly well-to-do group, either something will "have to give" in the budget, or some means will have to be found to expand it. Leaning on the congregation to give even more, while common enough, is a dubious course of action, because it tends to squeeze more from those who are good-hearted even when they can least afford it (violating 2Cor.8:12-13), while hardening those who tend to be less generous in that very attitude (violating 2Cor.9:7).

The "tithing" solution hit upon by all too many churches and denominations is completely illegitimate, never being mentioned in the New Testament, and makes a mockery of all true giving, transforming it from a joyous free-will sacrifice into a system of legalistic necessity. Tithing was a system of taxation meant for Israel under the Law whose primary purpose was to support the Levitical priesthood. We are not Israel. We are not under the Law. And there is no more Levitical priesthood (not in this Church Age, at any rate). More to the point, biblical tithing was agricultural not monetary, and accomplished in ways impossible to duplicate at present (e.g., Deut.26:12; cf. Lev.27:30-32; Num.18:21-29; Deut.12:6-18; 14:22-29). When money comes to the forefront, it tends to drive out everything good (Matt.6:19-24; 1Tim.6:6-10).

3. Other Issues

a. Communion

(23) For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, (24) and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in *remembrance* of me." (25) In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in *remembrance* of me." (26) For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

1st Corinthians 11:23-26 NIV

⁵² As observed earlier, having "all things in common" as the Jerusalem believers did for a short season was a temporary expedient for very special circumstances and not continued past the initial period of the apostolic era (Acts 3:44-45).

Communion, as we have come to call this remembrance of our Lord, is the *only* ceremony (rite, ritual, sacrament) authorized for the Church today.⁵³ Communion is *not* "magic". It does not transform the bread and the cup into anything other than what they are. It does not impart any sort of mysterious "grace" or blessing. It is just as Paul says above (and as our Lord said as well: Matt.26:26-29; Mk.14:22-25; Lk.22:15-20; cf. Jn.6:51-59), a ceremony of *remembering* Him and His work on the cross in rescuing us from our sins. We are saved because Jesus Christ came into this world and became a man as well as God, and because He stood judgment for all of our sins on the cross (2Cor.5:21; Heb.9:14; 1Pet.2:25), and keeping these most important of all truths firmly in mind – the very basis of the gospel – is clearly essential. That is what biblical communion is designed to do.

The bread we eat represents Christ's physical body which He took on in order to be able to bear our sins (Matt.26:26; Mk.14:22; Lk.22:19); the cup represents "the blood of Christ", not His literal blood (which was still in His body after He voluntarily gave up His spirit: (Jn.19:34; cf. Matt.27:50; Mk.15:37; Lk.23:46; Jn.19:30), but His work in standing judgment for our sins (Matt.26:28).⁵⁴

Eating and drinking are not things angels need to do, but God designed human beings in the way He did in order to provide us – believers – with a constant reminder of who Jesus is and had to be and what our Lord did for us and had to do in order to save us.

Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you."
John 6:53 NKJV

Nothing could be more solemn than remembering what we owe our dear Savior for what He did for us in coming into this world and dying for our sins, and as a result it is beyond dangerous for believers to trivialize this ceremony of remembrance or to partake of it when "unclean", that is, when being out of fellowship with Him because of some refusal to repent and confess one's sins (1Cor.11:27-34). But it is the *remembrance* taking place in the believer's heart which is solemn, *not* any ritual trappings of ceremony. For this reason, whenever "communion" takes place, either in a church gathering or at a common meal or the believer him/herself prior to eating, the key thing is to "sanctify the Lord Jesus in your hearts" (1Pet.3:15), making a point of *remembering* who He is – God and man – and what He has done in dying for all of our sins.

For the local church, therefore, explaining all this before any such ceremony is important to do. For it is the act of true and sincere *remembrance* and appreciation of our Lord and His work for us on the cross that is at issue – whereas the adoption of rigid procedural details tends to make the

⁵³ See BB 4A Christology, section I.5.j.5, "The Last Supper", and BB 4B Soteriology, section II.5.f.3, "The Meaning of the Communion Memorial".

⁵⁴ See BB 4B Soteriology, section II.4, "The Blood of Christ".

ritual itself solemn rather than the truths it is meant to have us recall (exactly the opposite of what our Lord intended).

b. Water-Baptism

(4) There is one body and One Spirit – just as when you were called it was in one hope that you were called. (5) There is One Lord (i.e., Jesus Christ), one faith, *one baptism*. (6) There is One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.
Ephesians 4:4-6

For believers in Jesus Christ in our present Age of the Church, there is one – and *only* one baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit given first at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), and shortly thereafter to all at the point of faith in Christ (e.g., Rom.8:9; 1Cor.12:13; Gal.3:1-5)

"I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and [with] fire".
Matthew 3:11 NKJV

(4) And gathering them together [Jesus] commanded [the disciples] not to depart from Jerusalem, but to await the promise of the Father (i.e., the Holy Spirit) "which you heard about from Me. (5) For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Spirit not many days from now".
Acts 1:4-5

Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'
Acts 11:16 NIV

Our Lord came "to His own" (Jn.1:11), namely, " to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt.15:24) in fulfillment of all of the promises and prophecies of the old covenant which anticipated Him and His sacrifice. John's baptism was a "baptism of repentance" (Mk.1:4; Lk.3:3; Acts 13:24; 19:4) designed to bring those lost sheep back into the fold to which they already belonged, and thus "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Lk.1:17). The purpose and the symbolism of water-baptism are thus entirely at odds with and inappropriate to the present dispensation of truth in the Church Age, the New Covenant of revelation in Jesus Christ, and have nothing whatsoever to do with the "one baptism" that defines this age, namely, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which so marvelously empowers believers to accomplish God's will for our lives.⁵⁵

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.
Galatians 5:18 NKJV

⁵⁵ See BB 5 Pneumatology, section II.B.2.b, "Baptism of the Spirit".

As demonstrated earlier in this study, the brief moment during the apostolic period where water-baptism was rarely practiced after Pentecost had to do with a legitimate desire not to exclude those within the Jewish orbit saved after the cross from fellowship with those who had participated in John's baptism. But that generation has long since passed, and we have it from the greatest apostle himself that this ritual is now not only unnecessary but potentially harmful – as the subsequent history of the church-visible has shown clearly enough as well (1Cor.1:17). Resorting to water-baptism is thus not only unauthorized for local churches today but can also have many negative consequences, not the least of which is the not-so-subtle legalism it exudes, tending to equate salvation, security and spirituality with this unsanctioned ritual behavior.

c. Confession and other rituals

(1) O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? (2) This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? (3) Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? (4) Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? (5) Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?
Galatians 3:1-5 NKJV

Where the teaching of the truth is lacking, where faith-response to the truth is lacking, it is inevitable for something else to rush into that void. Emotionalism and legalism are two of the most common substitutes which the devil has proffered in his war against the truth over the course of the Church Age. As with the pretense to gifts and miracles no longer being given or effected, the institution of unauthorized rites, procedures, regulations and rituals, many of which harken back to elements of the Law (but which are of course not genuinely part of it), has from the time of the apostles always been part and parcel of that attack. Christians form local fellowships – churches – for mutual encouragement and edification through the Word of God, its teaching by a pastor and its ministrations through the gifts of the individual members. But falsely adding to the mission of the local church and going "beyond what is written" (1Cor.4:6; cf. 2Jn.1:9) never ends well.

(18) Then behold, men brought on a bed a man who was paralyzed, whom they sought to bring in and lay before Him. (19) And when they could not find how they might bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the housetop and let him down with his bed through the tiling into the midst before Jesus. (20) When He saw their faith, He said to him, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." (21) And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? ***Who can forgive sins but God alone?***" (22) But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered and said to them, "Why are you reasoning in your hearts? (23) "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise up and walk'?" (24) "But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"—He said to the man who was paralyzed, "I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house." (25) Immediately he rose up before

them, took up what he had been lying on, and departed to his own house, glorifying God.
Luke 5:18-25 NKJV

The Pharisees were correct about one thing: only God can forgive sins (cf. Mk.2:7; Lk.5:21). But in their unbelieving hardness of heart, they refused to accept that Jesus Christ *is* God, and that as the Son of Man, the One who has blotted out the sins of the entire world with His blood, He most definitely has the right to forgive sins – and so He does, for all those who turn to Him in faith, and for all those who belong to Him when they confess their sins.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1st John 1:9

We confess our sins *to Him*, and we are forgiven *by Him*. All believers are responsible to act in forgiveness towards our fellow believers (Matt.6:14-15; 18:21-35; Mk.11:25; Lk.6:37; 17:4), but our forgiveness of wrongs committed against us (whether merely perceived or actual), is different from the forgiveness and restoration to fellowship that follows our repentance and confession to the Lord of all we have thought and said and done which has been sinful before Him (Ps.51:4). No human being has the right or the ability to issue such forgiveness and restoration, and therefore no believer should ever think that confession to another human being is in any way valid or could possibly have any effect in the eyes of God.⁵⁶ We believers are all accountable directly to our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, and imposing any false layer between Him and us – whether priest or pastor or 'discipler' – is a path fraught with the utmost spiritual danger.⁵⁷

(36) He told them this parable: "No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. (37) And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. (38) No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. (39) And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, 'The old is better'."

Luke 5:36-39 NKJV

Although they have the same focus, salvation through faith, the New Covenant is dramatically different from the Old in the way in which that central truth – Jesus Christ and His sacrifice – is presented. That is because He has now been revealed to the world and His work of redemption has

⁵⁶ James 5:16 is no exception; as believers we do have the right to *petition* the Lord on behalf of our brothers and sisters in Christ to ask for their forgiveness (Jn.20:23; 1Jn.5:16; cf. Jas.5:15). See BB 3B Hamartiology, section V.1, "Repentance, Confession, and Forgiveness".

⁵⁷ The word "disciple" from the Greek *mathetes* means "student"; believers are all indeed "students", disciples . . . of Jesus Christ, not of men, and we "disciple" by learning the truth of Him who is the truth, the Word of God incarnate.

now been fully accomplished. So while we draw great insight and encouragement from all of the Old Testament scriptures (Rom.15:4; 1Cor.10:11), it is not appropriate for local churches to attempt to reinstitute the Law or any portion of it.

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.
Romans 10:4 NASB

Under the Law, there was a dedicated structure for the worship of God – the tabernacle and the temple. But local churches do not require a building of their own, and if they come to possess one, there will be nothing "holy" about it. There was an altar before the tabernacle and the temple, but local churches have no need of one, and no such thing is authorized by scripture. The temple had a menorah, but local churches have no need for elaborate candlesticks. The temple rites were officiated by Levitical priests, but all believers are now priests of Jesus Christ (1Pet.2:5; 2:9; Rev.1:6; 5:10; 20:6). Our prayers are incense (Rev.5:8; 8:3-4), so that we have no need of priests waving censers. In short, all of these and many more rituals perverted and purloined from the Law or inherited from false religious tradition have no place in the local church, a place meant to be dedicated to the truth of the Word of God.

[I write these things to you so that] if I am delayed you may know how [believers] ought to comport themselves in a house of God which is *a church* (or "an assembly") of the living God, [that is] a pillar and support for *the truth*.
1st Timothy 3:15

d. Sabbath or Sunday Worship

(23) Now it happened that He went through the grainfields on the Sabbath; and as they went His disciples began to pluck the heads of grain. (24) And the Pharisees said to Him, "Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" (25) But He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, he and those with him: (26) how he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the showbread, which is not lawful to eat except for the priests, and also gave some to those who were with him?" (27) And He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. (28) Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath."
Mark 2:23-28 NKJV

(16) For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath. (17) But Jesus answered them, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." (18) Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.
John 5:16-18 NKJV

Our Lord was sinless from birth to the moment He gave up His spirit (2Cor.5:21; Heb.4:15; 7:26-27; 1Pet.2:22; 1Jn.3:5); otherwise He would not have been qualified as the "lamb without spot or

blemish" to bear our sins (1Pet.1:19). Therefore our Lord's "breaking of the Sabbath" was not a violation of the Law of God but of the laws of man (Matt.15:9; cf. Is.29:13). The purpose of the Sabbath was physical rest and peace (Ex.20:9-11; 23:12; Deut.5:13-14), providing opportunity to hear and learn the truth of God's Word – to do God's will. As our Lord's defiance of the Pharisees thus makes clear, it is that purpose of the Sabbath that was important, namely, doing the will of God and the work of God – attending to the truth of God.

(9) So there does remain a "Sabbath day's rest" for the people of God. (10) For he who has entered into [God's] rest has himself ceased from his works just as God did from His own. (11) Let us therefore be eager to enter into that [continual and spiritual] rest, lest anyone fall [from grace] following the same pattern of disobedience [as the Exodus generation did].

Hebrews 4:9-11

As so many other things under the New Covenant, the physical has been replaced by the spiritual, the anticipatory ritual by the unveiled reality. While Sabbath day observance was commanded under the Law, believers during the Church Age are instructed to engage in a continuous moment by moment Sabbath journey with the Lord, resting in Him at *all* times (Heb.4:1-11; cf. Rom.14:5-8; Col.2:16-17). For this reason, the fourth is the only commandment not repeated in the New Testament; nor do we have any command therein to make any day of the week "special", neither Saturday nor Sunday – nor any special feast day or day of celebration. In fact, things are exactly the opposite:

(5) One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. (6) He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.

Romans 14:5-6 NKJV

(16) So don't let anyone judge you in regard to food or drink, or in the category of festival observances, be it of new moons or Sabbaths. (17) All these things are shadows of what was to come, but the reality has to do with Christ.

Colossians 2:16-17

There is no law against believers holding regular services on Sunday – or on Saturday or on any other day of the week which may be convenient for them. But there is nothing more holy about one day versus any other day. Sabbath observance was the rule under the Levitical priesthood, a special sign between the Lord and the people of Israel to show that they belonged specially to Him (Ezek.20:12-13). But under the New Covenant we believers of all nations are all priests before Him, and we are responsible to serve Him at all times – not just on one day of the week – walking in a day by day Sabbath rest with the One who is our peace, leaving off of our own works and entering into His rest at all times (Heb.4:9-11).

For He says: "In an acceptable time I have heard you, And in the day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.
2nd Corinthians 6:2

(1) Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. (2) For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. (3) For we who have believed do enter that rest . . .
Hebrews 4:1-3a NKJV

(11) Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron? (12) For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law.
Hebrews 7:11-12 NKJV

(12) Therefore Jesus too, in order that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. (13) So then let us go out to Him outside of the camp, bearing His reproach. (14) For we do not have here [on earth] a city which [is meant to be] lasting; rather we are eagerly looking forward to the city that is destined [to come] (i.e., the New Jerusalem).
Hebrews 13:12-14

e. Women in Leadership

Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says.
1st Corinthians 14:34 NKJV

(11) Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. (12) But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.
1st Timothy 2:11-12 KJV

These verses are referring to the teaching of the Word of God in the main assembly of the local church. If they are considered by some to be offensive to women, it is good to consider that they are equally so to all but a small handful of men. That is because 1) the command to silence is a command to respect the teaching of the Word of God and applies equally to all men, women and children who have come together to hear it taught; and 2) when this is taking place, only the pastor-teacher is to be speaking.

Let all things be done decently and in order.
1st Corinthians 14:40 NKJV

Since only a small number of believing men are given the gift of pastor-teacher, since an even much smaller number ever become prepared to teach the Word of God, and since only one may be

teaching at a time, rather than being some misogynistic regulation which is grossly unfair to women, this command is in reality a principle of order and discipline which applies to every believer who has ever sat down to hear the teaching of God's Word. And since that is true even of every gifted man who has ever eventually gone on to become prepared to teach himself, it is a principle and a rule true that applies to us all.

(4) Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, was judging Israel at that time. (5) And she would sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim. And the children of Israel came up to her for judgment.
Judges 4:4-5 NKJV

Any believing woman who whole-heartedly follows the Lord and gives herself over to the challenge of spiritual growth, progress and production, will find that the opportunities He gives for such production are abundant and multifarious, far more so than was the case under the Law of Moses (where women held no Levitical offices). The only limits on any believer today, male or female, are the ones we choose to put on ourselves. Neither race nor gender nor nationality nor age nor physical attributes nor anything else whatsoever can prevent God from blessing when He chooses to bless or our Lord from calling us into any service if such is His will.

(4) There are different gifts, but the same Spirit; (5) and there are different ministries, but the same Lord (i.e., Jesus Christ); (6) and there are different results, but the same God [the Father] who brings about all results in all cases. (7) And to every [Christian] has been given a manifestation of the Spirit for the good (i.e., the edification of the Church).
1st Corinthians 12:4-7

It is One and the same [Holy] Spirit who empowers all these [gifts], distributing them to each one individually according as He wills.
1st Corinthians 12:11

And to each of us this grace has been given according to the measure of the gift of Christ.
Ephesians 4:7

The Church of Jesus Christ is, as we have seen, one Body, and there is an important, God-given purpose for each individual member of that Body. We cannot change the "part" we are – that is the Lord's decision. But we certainly can determine to be the best foot or hand or eye or nose or arm or leg we can possibly be. And we will be rewarded according to the effort, quality and consistency of the race we run for our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. That is true of every man in the Body of Christ; that is true of every woman. For there is no favoritism with God (Acts 10:34; Rom.2:11; Eph.6:9; Col.3:25).

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, *there is neither male nor female*; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
Galatians 3:28 NKJV

Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.
Colossians 3:11 NIV

We are all one Body in Jesus Christ, and all – men and women alike – have an absolutely equal opportunity to grow to spiritual maturity, progress in our walk with Jesus Christ, and produce a bountiful crop for Him resulting in great eternal reward.⁵⁸ The three crowns are available to all – but all must "compete according to the rules" in order to win them (2Tim.2:5; cf. 1Cor.9:24-27).

f. Christian Unity

(5) Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, (6) so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Romans 15:5-6 NASB

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.
1st Corinthians 1:10 NASB

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.
Ephesians 4:3 NIV

For every passage in scripture which proclaims the need for the unity of believers (e.g., Rom.12:16; 2Cor.13:11; Phil.2:2; 4:2; Col.3:14; 1Pet.3:8), there is another which stresses the necessary divisiveness of adherence to the truth (cf. 1Cor.5:11).

"Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword."
Matthew 10:34 NKJV

Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed.
2nd Thessalonians 3:14 NIV

(9) Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. (10) If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. (11) Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work.
2nd John 1:9-11 NIV

⁵⁸ See *Coming Tribulation* part 6, section I.7, "The Judgment and Reward of the Church".

This is not at all contradictory. Close attention to all the passages above will show that it is adherence to the truth – the actual truth of scripture as opposed to denominational perversions of it – which is the basis of all true Christian unity. Truth unites. Falsehood divides – or should.

Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace (i.e., the truth) and the things by which one may *edify* another (i.e., the truth).

Romans 14:19 NKJV

(11) Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (12) in order to prepare all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be built up, (13) until we all reach that *unifying* [goal] of *belief in and full-knowledge of* the Son of God, that each of us might be a perfect person, that is, that we might attain to that standard of maturity of the fullness of Christ; (14) that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, (15) but rather that we may, by embracing the truth in love, grow up in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. (16) In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love.

Ephesians 4:11-16

Ecumenicalism, Unitarianism, and denominationalism disparage truth as divisive and exalt instead a false unity based upon the rotten foundation of political action. All genuine believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, those who have committed themselves to be close to Him through His truth (Jer.30:21; Jas.4:8), will eschew to the depths of their souls this Faustian bargain. The implications – and the risks – of compromising the truth for the sake of such false unity will become all the more clear and pronounced during the soon to come Tribulation, when antichrist will institute his syncretic, one world religion that accepts every other religion into its bosom – except for biblical Christianity.

(9) And yet a third angel followed them, saying in a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives [his] mark upon his forehead or upon his hand, (10) he himself will also drink from the wine of God's wrath which has been mixed undiluted in the cup of His anger. And [that person] will be tormented in fire and sulfur before angels, [and] saints, and before the Lamb.

Revelation 14:9-10

It is the "belief in and full-knowledge of the Son of God" alone – saving faith in Jesus Christ, His true person, human and divine, and His work for us in the cross in dying for our sins – that is truly "unifying" (Eph.4:13). Any compromise with this fundamental tenet of our faith flirts with apostasy.

The Spirit explicitly says that in the end times (i.e., during the Tribulation) certain men

will rebel (lit., "apostatize") from the faith, giving their allegiance [instead] to deceitful spirits and demonic doctrines.

1st Timothy 4:1

(1) So be aware of this, that in the last days there will be difficult times. (2) For [in those times] there will be men (i.e., false teachers; cf. chap.2) concerned only for themselves, devoted to money, egotistic, arrogant, blasphemous, not concerned for their parents, ungrateful, (3) irreverent, implacable, slanderers, uninhibited, savage, despising the good, (4) betrayers, impetuous, megalomaniacal, devotees of pleasure rather than lovers of God, (5) possessing an [outward] appearance of godliness, but [in reality] having rejected its [true] power. From such men turn away.

2nd Timothy 3:1-5

Conclusion:

There is no greater privilege in this world than being a member of the true Church, the assembly of Jesus Christ. Following the commencement of the Church Age and the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have today more opportunities to learn about our dear Savior and to serve and follow Him the way He desires than ever before in history. We have the right and the means and the obligation to grow spiritually, progress in our walk toward Zion in His footsteps, and produce a bountiful crop which will elicit a "well done!" from Him, the One we love more than life (Phil.1:21). The way we do so is through attention to His Word, His truth, and the place we do so is the local church where that truth is being taught in a godly way. In the end, it is all about the truth.

(14) "I have given them Your word, and the world hated them, because they are not of the world just as I am not of the world. (15) I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one. (16) For they are not of the world just as I am not of the world. (17) So make them holy (i.e., "sanctified") **by means of Your truth – Your word is truth.** (18) And just as you sent Me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. (19) I am consecrating Myself for their sake, so that they too may be made holy (i.e., "be sanctified") **through truth.**"

John 17:14-19