

# RABBAN GAMALIEL

by Ralph V. Harvey

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Ralph Harvey and his wife, Verna, served over 40 years as missionaries, 38 years in Austria. In addition to church work in several Austrian cities, they were instrumental in establishing and operating a youth center, a printing and publishing house, a Bible Institute, and a national youth organization. They also worked with refugees in Austria, collected and distributed relief goods for needy countries of Eastern Europe and helped with church construction in Romania and Albania. Ralph has written articles in both English and German, relating to missions and church history. Since 2002, he has been working on this book and an autobiography. They are presently involved in recruitment for Avant Ministries (formerly Gospel Missionary Union).

## INTRODUCTION

My interest in Gamaliel began while doing research for a Christmas quiz (see Appendix I). I discovered that the Apostle Paul's famous teacher was of the lineage of David and would, therefore, have been in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. I then determined to learn as much as possible about this man.

Other than Gamaliel's call for tolerance in Acts, chapter five, and the contention of Paul that he had studied under this renowned teacher, the Bible does not mention Gamaliel. We must therefore lean heavily on other sources for information about this special personage. Josephus mentions him and Jewish historians have written volumes about their famous Rabbi, but not all of these sources are reliable. Still, it is possible to glean valuable historical background information that sheds light on his life and work. The New Testament gives us a clear picture of the Pharisees, among whom Gamaliel was the most prominent figure.

To my knowledge, no book by an evangelical author has dealt extensively with this important personality. Although Gamaliel is only mentioned twice in the Bible, he certainly deserves a more careful examination. I do not contend that this book attains that goal, but I do hope that it will encourage someone better qualified than I to do additional research and write an academic historical documentation on Gamaliel. I think the life of Gamaliel would even make a great film!

I have attempted to document and verify all information gathered, but this is not intended to be a historical book. My main purpose in writing this book is to inspire and encourage others to do some serious thinking about conclusions I have drawn. My study of

Gamaliel, his illustrious family and the times in which he lived have proved both encouraging and challenging to me, and I hope readers of this book will experience the same.

I strongly advise readers to keep their Bible handy when reading. I often include Bible references without the text. This is the first limited edition, and I welcome comments, corrections, suggestions, criticisms and questions for consideration in future printings.

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## CHAPTER 1

### GAMALIEL AND HIS FAMILY

#### *Gamaliel*

Gamaliel (“reward of God”) was known as Rabban Gamaliel, Gamaliel I, or Gamaliel the Elder. He was a respected doctor of the law, son of Rabbi Simeon and grandson of the revered Hillel. From the Bible, we know that he taught Saul of Tarsus, later known as the Apostle Paul. Paul himself makes this declaration in his testimony to the Jews (and advocated leniency toward Christians in Acts 5. Gamaliel’s birth date is unknown, but he was at least 30 years of age when Christ was born.

Gamaliel was a teacher of distinction, and his ancestry, influence and reputation soon earned him a seat on the Sanhedrin. Gamaliel was one of a select group of Palestinian masters of the Jewish Oral Law. According to Jewish tradition, Gamaliel succeeded his father, Simeon, and his grandfather, the renowned sage Hillel, whose school of thought he faithfully represented.

Gamaliel was also *nasi*, a term for the president of Judaism’s supreme judiciary and legislative body, the *Sanhedrin*. The title had become a hereditary one since the days of Gamaliel’s grandfather, Hillel the Elder.

Gamaliel was first to be given the title *Rabban*, “our teacher,” rather than *Rabbi*, which means “my teacher.” Like his grandfather Hillel, Gamaliel was also given the title *ha-Zaqen* (the Elder) to distinguish him among Rabbis of his time.

The historian, Josephus Flavius, mentions both the Gamaliel of Scriptures and his grandson Gamaliel II. The

*Mishnah* speaks of Gamaliel (Aboth 1; Sota 9,15; Gittin 4,2; Baba mez. 5,8 etc.) and the Babylonian Talmud names Gamaliel as the third person of a five-generation dynasty of *nasi*. Hillel and Gamaliel are mentioned frequently in Jewish history books. Both men are held to be among the greatest Hebrew scholars of all time. Aboth 1 in the *Mishna* lists five pairs of Rabbi as “Bearers of the Law,” but Gamaliel’s recognition was so great that he was called “The Glory of the Law.” Sota 9,15 reads, “Since Gamaliel the Elder died, reverence for the law has ceased and purity and moderation are vanished.”

### ***Gamaliel’s Father***

Although little is known of Gamaliel’s father other than his name, Simeon (Hebrew form of Simon) was also a Rabbi of repute, for he was a member of the Sanhedrin, and at least for a time, he served as *nasi* or President.

Some scholars conjecture that Gamaliel’s father is that same Simeon mentioned in Luke 2:25-35, while other historians contend that such a distinguished personage as Simeon, son of Hillel, would hardly have been referred to simply as a “just and devout man of Jerusalem.” They categorize this postulation with the legend of two sons of Simeon, Charinus, and Leucius, as reported in the apocryphal gospel of Nicodemus.

I personally believe that the Simeon mentioned in Luke 2 could well be the father of Gamaliel. According to St. Luke, Simeon was advanced in years and claimed to have received a revelation of the Holy Ghost, that he would not die before he had seen the anticipated Messiah. If some ordinary Jew had made this statement, it would hardly have been deserving of special notice. Many Jews were expecting the imminent appearance of the Christ, as can be seen in Matthew 2:3; Luke 2:25-40 and Luke 3:15.

Luke uses extraordinary language in describing Simeon as “a just and devout man of Jerusalem.”

Simeon’s prophecies would indicate a special personage rather than an ordinary devout Jew. Upon seeing Joseph and Mary with Jesus in the temple on the occasion of his dedication, Simeon took the child into his arms and uttered what is called the *Canticle Nunc Dimittis*. After blessing the family, he prophesied concerning Jesus, that he was “set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against.” Of his mother, he prophesied, “Yea a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

If Simeon was truly Gamaliel’s father and he died soon after seeing the Savior (as he prayed), he would have lived his entire life in the shadow of his illustrious father, Hillel. Patriarchs maintained prominence throughout their entire lives and Hillel reportedly died around 10 AD at 120 years of age! Simeon would have been between 80 and 90 years of age at the time of Christ’s birth and his son Gamaliel had likely achieved considerable recognition as a learned Rabbi by this time. Hillel became *nasi* of the Sanhedrin around 30 BC and by the time Simeon became *nasi*, Gamaliel would have been a respected teacher in Israel. It is even likely that Gamaliel became a member of the Sanhedrin during the lifetime of both his father and grandfather. Gamaliel claimed to have learned at the feet of the great sages, which would have included both ancestors. Gamaliel’s son Simeon II is quoted as saying, “All my life I grew up among the sages, and I found nothing better for a person than silence. And not the learning is the thing, but the doing. And whoever talks too much causes sin.” (Perkei Avos 1).

It is possible that he is giving praise to his grandfather Simeon, who was known more for his deeds

and quiet wisdom than for leadership abilities for which Hillel and Gamaliel had become famous. He certainly had a high respect for his father, for he named his eldest son Simeon rather than naming him after his grandfather Hillel. The next descendant to be named after Hillel, was Hillel II, influential between 330-365 A.D. Hillel may have requested that no descendent be named after him, for he placed a high value on humility.

Although Hillel, Gamaliel the Elder, Simeon II and Gamaliel II are all honored in the *Mishna*, the elder Simeon is not mentioned at all. Jewish chroniclers report that all, including Simeon, were leaders of the Sanhedrin. The complete absence of any reference in the *Mishna* to Simeon, father of Gamaliel and son of Hillel, is remarkable when one considers that the Hillite dynasty dominated the Jewish nation for five generations!

Some historians have attempted to explain the omission of Simeon as a copying error, but that would be a rarity, since the Scribes were very meticulous in such matters! This strange silence would rather lend to argumentation for the Simeon of Luke 2 being Gamaliel's father. It would certainly have been an embarrassment to Jewish leaders when Christians later made reference to Simeon's pronouncement that Jesus was the promised Christ. Simeon would have fallen into disfavor with Jewish leaders for making such a bold prophecy. A later sage, Avtalon, could have had Simeon in mind when he spoke, "Sages, watch what you say, lest you become liable to the punishment of exile, and go into exile to a place of bad water and die, and disciples who follow you drink bad water and die, and the name of Heaven be thereby profaned." (Perkei Avos 1)

## ***Gamaliel's Grandfather***

Gamaliel's grandfather, Hillel, is acclaimed by Jewish historians to have been the greatest spiritual leader of his time, a reputation which was exceeded only by Gamaliel himself.

Hillel was born in Babylon, but moved to Jerusalem around 70 BC to study scriptures and the traditions of the fathers. His teachers were Shemaiah and Abtalion. Josephus called them Sameas and Pollion.

Hillel was soon recognized as an authority among the Pharisees and the scribes of Jerusalem. He became the head of the "great school", later associated with Shammai, Hillel's peer in the study of Jewish Law. Hillel's sayings were recorded partly in Hebrew, the language of his school and partly in "the Babylonian language" which was Aramaic, the language of the people.

In Sifre, Deut. 357, Hillel's life is compared to that of Moses. Both men are said to have lived 120 years. At 40, Hillel moved from Babylon to Palestine while Moses fled Egypt at 40. Hillel then devoted the next 40 years to study, and Moses spent 40 years of preparation in the wilderness tending the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro. Hillel's final 40 years were spent as the spiritual patriarch of Israel just as the final 40 years of Moses' life were spent as God's chosen leader of Israel. Hillel's leadership in the Sanhedrin began a hundred years before the destruction of Jerusalem according to Shab. 15a. We can thus estimate the dates of Hillel as 110 B.C. To 10 A.D.

## ***Gamaliel's Early Years***

To my knowledge, there is no extensive record of Gamaliel's childhood and youth other than that which Gamaliel himself relates and that which can be deduced from the circumstances in which he lived.

The expectations associated with being the grandson and son of learned Rabbis and *nasi* must have left an indelible impression on his young mind and strongly influenced his lifestyle. Education would have begun at an early age with little time for play and idleness. The Hillel school of thought must have influenced his upbringing. We can thus assume that although his parents placed great value on study and learning, they would have showed love and understanding for typical childish traits, needs and concerns.

## CHAPTER 2

### GAMALIEL AND JESUS

Gamaliel was already a prominent teacher of the law at the time of Christ's birth. It is even possible that he was a member of the Sanhedrin at the time.

#### *General Expectation of the Messiah*

Thanks in part to the teachings of Gamaliel and his fellow Rabbis, Jews were familiar with Old Testament prophecies regarding the promised Messiah. Not only Simeon and Anna, but the entire city of Jerusalem expected the imminent arrival of the Christ (Matthew 2:3; Luke 2:25-40 and 3:15; John 1:19-27). The wealthy Joseph of Arimathea and member of the Sanhedrin was also among those expecting the Messiah (Mark 15:43).

#### *Gamaliel in the Palace of Herod the Great*

Several months after Jesus was born, wise men from the East arrived in Jerusalem seeking a newborn king of the Jews. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that these were kings, but they were most likely Chaldeans who studied the stars in the environs of Babylon, now Iraq.

The arrival of the wise men in Jerusalem did not go unnoticed and their query about a newborn king caused no small stir in the king's palace. When the wise men told King Herod that they had seen "his" star in the East, the king took the news very seriously. There was no newborn baby in Herod's palace, so the king called in all the leading theologians for consultation. Gamaliel was certainly among their number, for he was too important to overlook. In the *Mishna*, Pesahim 88, he is called an "advisor to the king."

The Chief Priests and Scribes informed King Herod that according to Micah 5:1, the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. Herod sent the wise men to this town with instructions to report back to him on their findings (Matthew 2:1-8).

Herod was so irate about the failure of the wise men to return that he ordered the slaughter of all male infants, two years and younger, according to the time in which the star had appeared to the visitors from the East. Historians estimate that the number of infants killed was somewhere between 25 and 100.

If Gamaliel felt honored to be called into the palace of the king for consultation, he should have deemed himself even more privileged to be witnessing the glorious fulfillment of that ancient biblical prophecy which he himself had been boldly proclaiming. Ironically, it appears that this was not the case. The leading Jews seemed to place little significance on the visit of the Magi. It is also possible that they were very nervous about being called into Herod's palace. The king was notorious for his executions of leading Jews (see Appendix III).

### ***Gamaliel in Bethlehem***

It was a well known fact that the Messiah was to be of the lineage of David. According to the *Talmud*, Hillel was a descendant of the family of David. Some Jews even conjectured that Gamaliel could be the embodiment of that special personage and Gamaliel himself may have entertained the possibility of his son becoming the Savior of the nation Israel.

Like Joseph and Mary, Gamaliel would have traveled to Bethlehem for the census recorded in Luke's gospel, chapter two. Hillel and Simeon would have been granted exceptions due to their age, for the Roman "head tax" was only for those between 14 and 65 years of age. Gamaliel,

however, would have been expected to conform to the Emperor's decree.

Might Gamaliel have occupied a place of honor in the inn where there was no room for Joseph and Mary? Perhaps his donkey had the honor of sharing a stall with the Messiah, breathing the aroma of fresh hay and straw while its master inhaled the stuffy air of a crowded inn!

If Gamaliel did some quick calculating in the palace of King Herod, he would have realized, "I was in Bethlehem at that time!" Perhaps he concluded that an event of such magnitude and importance would not have bypassed a man of his importance. It is remarkable that unlearned shepherds experienced the visitation of angels and worshipped the newborn Christ in his manger bed, while highly esteemed theologians knew nothing of that pivotal occurrence in the history of mankind.

According to some authorities, the shepherds were probably watching sheep which were on their way to be sacrificed in Jerusalem. Certainly, this would have been an appropriate setting for the birth of God's own sacrificial Lamb!

### ***Jesus at Twelve***

At twelve years of age, we find Christ in the temple discussing Scripture and asking questions which confounded the "doctors of law." It would be difficult to imagine Gamaliel not being present, since this incident occurred immediately following the Passover.

### ***John the Baptist***

A decade later, all Israel was talking about John the Baptist. According to Luke 3:15 and John 1:19-27, many wondered if John was the Messiah. John's father was a Levite Priest, but his mother was of the lineage of David. Leading Jews (Gamaliel?) even sent Levites and priests to

Bethany on the Jordan to investigate this possibility (see also Malachi 4:5; Matthew 11:14 and 17:11-13). John seemed unimpressed by all this attention, and when Pharisees and Sadducees came to John's baptism, he called them a brood of snakes (Matthew 3:7)!

### *The Public Ministry of Jesus*

When Jesus began his public ministry, multitudes were soon following him. His teachings and miracles were the subject of heated discussions in both private homes and open market places. They were especially of concern to the Jewish leaders. The teachings and miracles of Jesus were problematic enough, but it was his superior knowledge of scripture and his open claim to be "the [not 'a'] Son of Man" which placed his name on the agenda of the Sanhedrin again and again. It is uncanny that Jewish leaders, who were best informed of prophecies regarding the coming Messiah, rejected Jesus' claims and even threatened to excommunicate anyone who believed him (John 9:22).

Jesus often made reference to the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and High Priests. In his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:20), Jesus told the crowd that the righteousness of the Pharisees was not sufficient to get them admitted to heaven. In Matthew 15:10, he called the Pharisees "blind leaders of the blind" (see also: John 9:39-41). When the Pharisees claimed that Jesus cast out demons in the power of Beelzebul (Matthew 22-42), he accused them of blasphemy and said that they were evil and adulterous. The highly uncomplimentary parables of Matthew 21 and the "woes" pronounced in chapter 23 were directed at the chief priests and Pharisees.

There are numerous incidents in which Jesus had dealings and confrontations with leading Jews, often the Pharisees. Luke 7:33 reports that a sinful woman anointed

Jesus' feet with perfume worth a year's salary. This took place in the home of a Pharisee named Simon. Luke 11 describes another incident in the home of a leading Pharisee. Jesus was accused of eating without washing his hands. In response, Jesus told the Pharisees and Doctors of Law that the blood of the prophets was on their hands (Luke 11:50)!

When leading Jews determined to kill Jesus (Matthew 12:14; Mark 3:6; John 7:32-48), can anyone imagine Gamaliel not having a part in the discussion? He may have attempted to discourage his colleagues from such an act, but he was certainly aware of their intent. Gamaliel was a leading Jewish sage throughout Christ's ministry, presiding over the Sanhedrin during the reigns of Tiberius, Caligula (Caius) and Claudias until about 50 AD.

### ***The Crucifixion***

At the end of Christ's earthly life, all the chief priests and elders of the people took counsel (the Great Sanhedrin) against Jesus to put him to death. It is difficult to imagine Gamaliel having no part in this.

The High Priests and elders paid Judas thirty pieces of silver to betray his Master. He later showed remorse and confessed his sin to the High Priests, who only laughed at him. Judas threw the money back into the temple and hung himself. The chief priests again called a council (Sanhedrin), deciding to purchase a potter's field with the blood money, which would be used as a cemetery for strangers.

When the temple guard was led to the Mount of Olives to arrest Jesus, Peter cut off the ear of Malchus, a servant of the High Priest. Jesus healed him! Gamaliel must have heard about that incident!

Jewish leaders chose mob violence as a method of influencing the people; they instigated them to demand the

release of Barabas rather than Jesus, and insisted on the death sentence for Jesus even after Pilate stated, "I find no fault in this man." Pilate commanded that a sign be fastened to the cross which read, "The King of the Jews." The High Priests protested, but this time, Pilate's word was final. All these things were definitely known to Gamaliel.

Unusual occurrences round about the crucifixion must have occupied the mind of Gamaliel and robbed him of sleep. There was a three-hour eclipse of the sun ("great darkness") and a great earthquake which opened graves, with reports of people coming back to life!

The event which would have made all these things pale in relative insignificance took place in the temple. The heavy and ornate veil, which separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies was torn from top to bottom - on the eve of the important Jewish Passover feast! Gamaliel's son, Rabbi Simeon, described this veil in the Mishna as follows: "The veil was an handbreadth thick, and woven of seventy-two twisted plaits; each plait consisted of twenty-four threads. [The veil] was forty cubits long, and twenty wide (60 x 30 feet), and made of eighty-two myriads (the meaning is not clear). Two of these veils were made each year, and it took three hundred priests to immerse one."

Joseph of Arimathaea, an acquaintance of Gamaliel and fellow member of the Sanhedrin, requested permission to lay the body of Jesus in his own tomb. The tomb was sealed by order of the High Priests and leading Pharisees. Temple guards and Roman soldiers were dispatched to watch over the tomb to assure that the body would not be stolen.

## ***Post-Resurrection Experiences***

Early Sunday morning, the soldiers reported to the High Priests that an angel had rolled the stone away from the grave and that the body was missing. The Great Sanhedrin, which would have included Gamaliel, was called together. They decided to bribe the soldiers with large sums of money to tell a preposterous and self-condemning lie. The soldiers were instructed to say that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus while they slept!

Gamaliel had to be well-informed and much-involved in these and other incidents surrounding the trial, death and resurrection of Christ. The disciples who walked down the road to Emmaus asked their yet unrecognized companion if he was the *only* person in Jerusalem who didn't know what had transpired. If everyone else knew, Gamaliel was certainly informed.

The reported post-resurrection appearances of Christ, the miraculous occurrences at Pentecost and apostolic miracles performed in the name of Jesus were definitely brought to Gamaliel's attention.

## ***Jesus was Different***

The humility of Jesus set him apart from the Jewish religious leaders of his time. He soon won the affection of the common people and was even called "Rabbi" (teacher). This popularity caused Gamaliel and other Jewish leaders much stress. The Pharisees built themselves up, loved high sounding titles and prestigious positions, but Jesus showed himself to be human, with a heart for people and their needs. When his own disciples tried to prevent children from bothering him, Jesus said, *Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.*

Jesus spoke much about the "kingdom of heaven" and preached the "gospel of the kingdom", but it was the

Pharisees who coined this terminology in reference to prophecies concerning the messiah. There are about 200 occurrences of the word “kingdom” in the Old Testament, but nowhere is a “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” mentioned. When Jesus adopted this terminology, he was, in effect, claiming to be that Messiah whose imminent arrival the leading scribes and Pharisees had been predicting! Jesus’ description of his kingdom did not match expectations of the scribes and religious teachers, however. They rejected Jesus because he did not fit their concept of the Messiah.

## CHAPTER 3

### GAMALIEL AND THE APOSTLES

#### *The Voice of Authority in the Sanhedrin*

The first Bible passage which mentions Gamaliel is found in Acts, chapter 5. The first 16 verses report on the miracles and spectacular events accompanying the preaching of the gospel by the Apostles. The High Priests had become jealous and were determined to put an end to their activities. Together with members of the Sadducees, they arrested the Apostles and threw them into prison. The following morning, all leading Jews were gathered for a meeting of the Great Sanhedrin. Gamaliel was not only a prominent member but would have been *nasi* at this time.

Once members of the Sanhedrin were gathered together, the High Priest sent soldiers to fetch the prisoners, but they returned with very disturbing news. Although the doors of the prison were tightly secured and the guards standing at their posts, the cells were empty. The prisoners were gone!

In the ensuing confusion, some very embarrassed High Priests and the Captain of the Temple Guard began to discuss what this could mean. One can imagine the noble gathering erupting in accusations by the Pharisees and counter attacks by Sadducees. There was probably some discussion as to what should be done to the negligent guards. In the middle of all this, a messenger arrived and announced, “The men you arrested are back in the temple preaching!”

The Captain of the Temple Guard hastily took his men to the temple and found the Apostles surrounded by a great crowd. After sizing up the situation, the Captain decided to refrain from any show of force for fear he could be stoned by an angry mob. He probably ordered the soldiers to remain in the background while he approached the Apostles and politely asked to speak with them in private. Once out of sight of the people, the soldiers would have reappeared to escort the Apostles into court.

When the Apostles appeared in court, we could normally expect that the first matter of discussion would be their “jail break,” but not a word was said about their mysterious disappearance. It is also interesting to note that the High Priest refrained from mentioning the name of Jesus.

When questioned by the Sanhedrin, the apostles offered no apologies and made no attempt to defend themselves. Instead of refuting the accusations brought against them, they used the occasion to preach the gospel of their resurrected Lord, Jesus the Christ. *Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Savior, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him (Acts 5:29-32).*

This unexpected bold response of Peter and the other Apostles filled the High Priests and other Jewish leaders with intense anger. *When they heard that, they were cut to the heart, and took counsel to slay them and they determined to kill them (Verse 33).* At this point, we have the first biblical reference to Gamaliel.

*Then stood up one in the Council, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space. And said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men. or before these days rose up Theudas, boasting himself to be somebody; to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves: who was slain; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to nought. After this man rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the taxing, and drew away much people after him: he also perished; and all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed. And now I say unto you, refrain from these men and let them alone. For if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nothing. But if it be of God, you cannot overthrow it; lest haply you be found even to fight against God. (Acts 5:34-39)*

The response of the Jewish leaders to Gamaliel's advice is an indication not only of his influence in the Sanhedrin, but also a tribute to the respect he commanded in Israel. Gamaliel ordered tolerance; it was not just a suggestion or advice, but a command!

Considering the character of Hillel's school which taught leniency rather than making harsh judgments, Gamaliel's liberal attitude could have been expected. In no way does this indicate a leaning toward or sympathy for the teachings of these early Christians. Considering the unusual wording of his advice, however, he must have had some doubts. The Sanhedrin followed Gamaliel's admonishment, but the Apostles were nonetheless beaten before their release ...*and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go* (verse 40).

The immediate reaction of the Apostles is typical of their activities in the ensuing months and years. *And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ* (verse 41).

### ***A Modern Controversy***

The High Priest voiced only one accusation against them, Saying, *Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us* (verse 28).

Throughout church history, Christians have been accused of blaming the Jews for the crucifixion of Christ. When Mel Gibson included the words of the angry mob, *His blood be on us and our children!* (Matthew 27:25) in his controversial film “The Passion of the Christ,” he came under such intense fire, that the Aramaic words were not translated.

While it is true that some Christian church leaders have accused the Jews of crucifying Christ, most Christians readily admit that their own sins were responsible for his death. The Apostles were Jews, and nowhere in the New Testament are the Jewish people blamed for crucifying Christ. The Bible does accuse the Jewish leaders of this evil deed, however. They used mob psychology to influence the people. Many of the same Jews who shouted “hosanna” at Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem were encouraged to cry “crucify him” a few days later. The leaders knew that they had no power to crucify a person without consent of the Roman Governor, and this permission would only be granted if it appealed to the masses. Three times, Pilate declared Jesus to be innocent, but the Jewish leaders insisted that he be

crucified. Their wish was finally granted, and Pilate publicly washed his hands of any responsibility. In effect, he was placing the responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus squarely on the Jewish leaders.

### ***Unintended Assistance to the Christian Cause***

The moderation which Gamaliel espoused permitted the young Christian church to thrive and become somewhat organized. Christians multiplied rapidly in Jerusalem, even winning over many of the priests (Acts 6:7). This leniency towards Christians lasted several years, long enough for the young movement to become well established and gain a strong following.

Rabban Gamaliel's love for the Greek language enhanced the proliferation of this language in Israel, thus paving the way for the New Testament scriptures. His son, Rabbi Simeon wrote, "There were a thousand pupils in my father's house; 500 studied the Torah and 500 studied Greek wisdom." Gamaliel's grandson, Rabbi Juda Hanassi stated, "Why speak Syriac in Palestine? Talk either Hebrew or Greek."

## CHAPTER 4

### GAMALIEL AND SAUL

#### *Saul's Teacher*

The second mention of Gamaliel in the Bible is found in the Apostle Paul's defense before the people of Jerusalem. In Acts 21, Jews from Asia Minor caused an outcry against Paul and an angry mob attempted to kill him after he claimed that salvation was offered to the Gentiles as well as to Jews. Many Jewish Christians were apparently in this crowd (Acts 21:21-22). In his defense before the people, Paul said, *I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day.* (Acts 22:3)

Saul was reared in a devout Jewish family which belonged to the party of the Pharisees. The family was of the tribe of Benjamin, and Saul was named after the first King of Israel. The family was apparently both wealthy and prominent. Saul would have felt honored to receive formal religious training from Gamaliel, the most famous and respected Rabbi of his time.

Saul's sister and nephew are mentioned in Acts 23:16. We can assume that the Apostle received a sizable inheritance which sustained him in his later years. During his imprisonment in Caesarea, Governor Felix sent for him often in hopes of receiving a bribe (Acts 24:25-26).

Having grown up in the important city of Tarsus in Cilicia, Saul would have learned Greek and become

familiar with the ways of the Gentiles. Few Jews could claim Roman citizenship by birth, as he did. This guaranteed him a position of honor in all parts of the far-reaching Roman kingdom.

Saul was fluent in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. He was familiar with the Torah (books of Moses) and Jewish traditions (oral law), which were held to be of equal importance. We don't know when or how long Saul studied under Gamaliel, but this must have partly coincided with the public ministry of Jesus. It is even possible that Saul heard Jesus teach at some time.

Paul did not claim to be a "disciple" of Gamaliel, but rather a student. A disciple would have been one whose intent was obtaining *smicha*, meaning that the student would accept the teacher's philosophy without question. If Paul had received this kind of recognition from the Jews, he certainly would have mentioned it just as he mentioned his Roman citizenship and belonging to the Pharisees.

The Bible says he was a "young man" when Stephen was stoned, probably around 30 years of age. Stephen's death would have taken place about five years after the crucifixion of Christ, so Saul was probably born just a few years after Jesus. An ancient tradition gives his birth at 2 AD. The New Testament reveals much about his background.

*Acts 23:6 But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question.*

*Acts 26:4-5 My manner of life from my youth, which was at the first among mine own nation at Jerusalem, know all the Jews; Which knew me from the beginning, if they would testify, that after the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.*

Philippians 3:4-6 *Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.*

Galatians 1:13-14 *For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.*

Paul's claim that he was known to all the Jews in Jerusalem is a startling statement which shows that he not only studied in Jerusalem, but had become a person of some prominence. This is further exemplified in the fact that he sat in on council meetings and obtained authorization from the High Priest to persecute Christians.

### ***A Serious Threat to the Delicate Balance of Power***

It would be appropriate at this point to describe the political landscape among leading Jews of the period.

The Sadducees held a majority among the High Priests, but the Pharisees were most popular among the people. The latter were divided into two major groups, the moderate school of Hillel, which was under the leadership of Gamaliel, and the Shammite school, which interpreted the Torah and Oral Law legalistically. Smaller movements such as the Essenes, Zealots and Herodians added to the divisiveness.

The Shammite Pharisees were politically more closely aligned with the Sadducees than to fellow

Pharisees of the Hillite school. The Jewish rebellion against Rome, which took place in 68-70 AD, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, was led by “Zealots” of the Shammite school together with prominent members of the Sadducees. Hillite Pharisees displayed a willingness to make concessions to the Romans in hopes of regaining power they had lost to the Sadducees.

The delicate political equilibrium in Jerusalem was threatening to disintegrate. All Jewish leaders were well aware that a strong messianic (Christian) movement would have a catastrophic effect on this constellation of power.

The time lapse between Gamaliel’s “edict of toleration” in Acts 5 and the stoning of Stephen in chapter 7 is probably less than a year, but the Christian movement was growing rapidly. “About three thousand souls” were added at Pentecost (Acts 2:41). A few verses later, we read that the Christians enjoyed the goodwill “of all the people” and that the Lord “added to the church daily.” Acts 4:4 gives the number of believing men at 5,000, and in Acts 5:14 “multitudes of both men and women” were being converted. In chapter six, we read of a multiplication of disciples, and verse 11 states that a great many priests had become Christians!

Every alarm bell and whistle must have been sounding in the council meetings of the Sanhedrin. We can imagine the heated debates about what to do. In Acts four and five, it was the High Priests and Sadducees who were most distraught. They may have felt compelled to listen to Gamaliel’s advice in chapter five, but after realizing that warnings and a show of tolerance were of none effect, the climate would have swung in favor of the Shammite Pharisees and Sadducees.

## ***The Position of Saul in this Power Structure***

Saul was somehow associated with the Great Sanhedrin of Jerusalem. He would have been too young to be a member, but some believe he was a sort of page boy or apprentice, who would later become eligible for full membership.

Saul listened intently to the debates of the differing parties and apparently became convinced that the tolerant stance shown by Gamaliel and his Hillite school had proven ineffective in stopping the fast growing sect. He was convinced that the Christian movement posed too serious a threat to be tolerated. He decided that this was no time for eloquent speeches, but rather for prompt and affirmative action!

Saul requested and received authorization from the High Priest Annas, who was a Sadducee, to arrest both men and women who espoused the Christian faith. In order to expedite his venture, soldiers were dispatched to accompany him. This too sheds light on Saul's standing among leading Jews.

## ***The Stoning of Stephen***

In Acts 9:1-2, we find the Christian church in Jerusalem in a state of disarray. Many Christians have been arrested or persecuted. Others are in hiding or have fled to surrounding areas and even into Asia Minor (now Turkey). The Apostle Paul describes his activities vividly in Acts 26:10-11: *Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities.*

Saul had not only received permission to persecute Christians in Damascus, but he was active in Jerusalem and other cities as well. He was present in the council and gave his consenting vote when it was determined to stone Stephen. In a prayer, Paul said, *Lord, they know that I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on thee: And when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him* (Acts 22:19-20).

Paul wrote to the Philippians (3:6) that in spite of (or perhaps because of!) his persecution of Christians, he was held to be “blameless” according to the law of the Pharisees. He wrote to the Galatian Church that he persecuted the church beyond measure and “wasted” it and then declares, *I profited in the Jews’ religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers* (Galatians 1:13-14). In plain language, the violent activities of Saul against the Christians enhanced his position and status among the religious leaders of Israel.

The execution of Stephen by stoning would normally have been contrary to Hillite principles, but it is quite apparent that Saul of Tarsus did not share these views in regards to the Christians. If he did, he departed from that stance when he began his rampage against the followers of Jesus.

As uncontested leader of the Hillite school and proponent of tolerance, Gamaliel would normally have been disappointed that his gifted and intelligent student, Saul, had shifted allegiance to the harsher interpretations of the Shammite school and the Sadducees. On the other hand, it is quite possible that Gamaliel himself was beginning to question the wisdom of showing tolerance to the Christians. The Bible tells us that the Sanhedrin was of

“one accord” in the decision to stone Stephen. It would have been unusual if Gamaliel had not been present and part of this decision (Acts 7:54-60).

At this point, I want to insert an interesting thought. Stephen was one of seven deacons selected in Acts 6 to meet the physical needs of needy believers such as widows and orphans. *Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word* (Acts 6:3-4).

Shortly afterwards, we find two of these men, Stephen and Philip, preaching the gospel. After Stephen was brutally murdered, Philip continued preaching and many were converted under his ministry (Acts 8:6-8). One might ask why Stephen and Philip were preaching, since they had been chosen to meet physical needs of the people so that Peter, James, John and other apostles could “give themselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.” When an Ethiopian eunuch needed someone to explain the scriptures to him, God sent Philip rather than one of the Apostles.

It is not people, but God who chooses his instruments and tools in building the church. And he chose one very unlikely candidate, as we shall soon see.

### ***Saul’s Conversion***

Damascus was the principle city of Syria, about 150 miles north of Jerusalem. There were numerous Jews in Damascus, and those who had become Christians seemed to enjoy a good reputation among them. Although Ananias was a Christian, he was held in high esteem by the Jews of the city (Acts 22:12). Perhaps this is why Saul planned to extradite the Christians to Jerusalem. The High Priest, which had given him authority and delegated temple

guards to accompany him, would see to their certain punishment.

Stephen's death and other persecutions of Saul were well known to the Christians in Damascus. They had received information about Saul's crusade to Damascus and were in fear and trembling at what awaited them (Acts 9:13).

### ***“High Noon”***

Just as Saul and the soldiers accompanying him were about to enter Damascus and proceed with their treacherous mission, God stepped into the picture as only he can. A brilliant light from heaven caused the noonday sun to pale and struck Saul to the ground!

God created man with a free will, and he doesn't force anyone into his kingdom. But God looks on the heart and when he sees someone who takes his faith seriously and who earnestly seeks to serve God, all those false teachings and traditions that tend to blind people to the truth cannot hinder his light from penetrating that darkness.

God may have been working in Saul's heart even before his personal encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Stephen's bold message and his countenance while being stoned must have made a deep impression on the young man. As already mentioned, Saul may possibly have had some exposure to Christian teaching, and he may even have heard Jesus speak at some time.

Saul met the God he thought he was serving face to face and was struck blind for three days. Everyone in his party saw the bright light and fell to the earth, but only Saul understood the voice. If there was any shadow of a doubt, who was responsible for this dramatic experience, the voice from heaven erased that doubt. *I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecuteth* (Acts 22:8).

Jesus himself spoke to Saul. There is a seeming contradiction between Acts 9:7 and 22:9. Did the accompanying soldiers hear the voice or didn't they? Two possible explanations are given. Some contend that the men heard Saul's voice, but not the Lord speaking. A more likely explanation is that they heard a voice or sound but they didn't understand or recognize what was said or that it was Jesus speaking. Acts 9 uses the Greek *phonos*= to hear sound, whereas Acts 22 uses the Greek *phonen*= to hear with understanding. It may have sounded like thunder or as an unintelligible voice to the others, but Saul understood clearly what Jesus was saying to him.

Saul stayed three days with a man named Judas, who lived in a street named "Straight." He neither ate nor drank anything during those three days, but he fasted and prayed. He had been spiritually blind and now he was also physically blind. In his miserable condition, he might well have considered the plight of the disobedient prophet Jonah, whom God had punished in a similar fashion. Jonah was in total darkness for three days and nights until the fish regurgitated him onto a beach. As was the case with Jonah, Saul's life would be dramatically changed and the world would take notice!

Saul was not yet converted when the foundation of the church was laid at Pentecost. The strange occurrences that were reported of the Christians was only hearsay, but now, he was experiencing God's powerful working firsthand. And in God's omniscient plan, his fearful "lamb," Ananias, was going to have the honor of sharing the gospel with the "big bad wolf," Saul, leading him to Christ and baptizing him. He would also be instrumental in restoring Saul's eyesight.

## ***About Wolves and Lambs***

Before I continue with the story of Saul's conversion, I want to share a few thoughts from Luke, chapter ten.

In Luke 10, Jesus sent out seventy disciples to do missionary work and told them, "Behold, I send you forth as lambs among wolves!" Considering other passages that speak of wolves, this is an amazing statement!

Jesus warned his followers about wolves in Matthew 7:15: *Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.* In John 10, Jesus said that a hired shepherd sees the wolf coming and flees. The wolf snatches his meal and the other sheep are scattered. Paul warned the church in Acts 20:29, *For I know this, that after my departure, great wolves will enter in among you, and they won't spare the flock!*

The havoc wolves wreak among sheep can hardly be considered collateral damage. It is outright homicide! Wolves kill lambs for a living, yet Jesus sent his disciples as "lambs among wolves!"

Sheep are kept in flocks and wolves travel in packs, but "the good shepherd" sent his lambs out two by two into a pack of wolves! Talk about unequal matches!

Surprise! In verse 20, we read that all seventy disciples not only returned safely but even happy and excited about their experiences. They exclaimed, "Even the devils obey us!" Jesus had to chide them a little about their over-exuberance. "Now, now boys; don't get so hyper! Just be happy that your names are written in my book!" (my own paraphrase).

## ***The Stage is Set***

In Acts 9:1-2, Saul of Tarsus arrives in Damascus with his “pack of wolves” – armed soldiers. He is carrying legal authorization from the High Priest to arrest Christians and take them bound to Jerusalem.

Ananias knows nothing about Saul’s experience on the road to Damascus reported in Acts 9:3-9. In verses 10-14, this “scared lamb” receives marching orders from the “Good Shepherd” to go over to Straight Street and pay the “big bad wolf” a friendly visit!

God has been preparing the heart of Saul for three days, and now he must prepare Ananias’ heart. God spoke to Saul, calling him by name (Saul means “asked of God”). God also called Ananias (“God is gracious”) by name. Ananias responded much as Samuel and Gideon had done by saying, “Behold, I am here Lord!” God appeared to both Saul and Ananias in a vision, preparing them to meet each other. Both were apparently praying when God appeared to them.

Ananias told the Lord what he had heard about Saul: *Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name* (Acts 9:13).

The Lord then told Ananias what HE knew about Saul! *He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake* (Acts 9:14).

## ***The Lambs Win!***

Ananias had nothing to fear, for he was not alone. The Lamb of God defeated Satan on the cross and he had already disarmed the wolf, Saul, on the road to Damascus. Saul may have jailed a bunch of Christians and assisted in

the stoning of Stephen, but he and his pack of wolves were no match for the Lambs of God.

*And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized (Acts 9:17-18).*

In just three day's time, God transformed a raving wolf into a helpless new-born lamb. We find Ananias nursing his wounds, bathing him (baptism) and giving him nourishment from God's Word. What a picture!

### ***Baby Steps***

We are not told what happened to the soldiers, but it is not difficult to imagine that they returned to Jerusalem to report to the High Priest. They would have left before Saul met Ananias and thus not have known about the meeting between these two men. They would only know that Saul had been struck blind and was rendered incapable of carrying out his task.

Saul remained in Damascus for a time and preached that Jesus was the Christ. He then went into seclusion for three years in Arabia. This could have been near Damascus or in a far corner of Syria. We only know this from Paul's testimony in Galatians 1:13-24, and he does not tell us much about that period of time.

Saul soon became Paul, and from this time forth, he was the one being imprisoned and persecuted.

## CHAPTER 5

### GAMALIEL'S PREDICAMENT

It is important that we understand the situation in which Gamaliel finds himself if we are to comprehend his actions. Although we have already mentioned some of the following, I want to review the dramatic historical events which took place in Israel during the lifetime of Gamaliel.

As a leader of the Jews, Gamaliel must have spent many sleepless nights during the ministry of Christ, especially in his final hours. News of undeniable miracles performed by the man from Nazareth were the talk of the nation. Great crowds, at times more than ten thousand strong, followed him.

Jesus' knowledge of scripture and display of wisdom confounded the doctors of law when they listened to him in the temple at twelve years of age. At thirty, people were calling him Rabbi (teacher) and hanging on his every word. *And they were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes.* (Mark 1:22).

Gamaliel might have covertly admired Jesus' ability to make scriptures understandable to the common people, using simple illustrations and stories. Jesus' public humiliation of the Sadducees would have given Gamaliel some satisfaction, but he rebuked the Pharisees in an equally embarrassing manner. His public rebuttals of Pharisaical teachings and customs, and the "woes" pronounced on them because of their hypocritical attitudes (Matthew 23) had to be painful.

The passion week, with the brutal crucifixion of Christ and accompanying circumstances must have caused Gamaliel much anguish, but news of Jesus' death would have elicited a sigh of relief from his tortured soul.

Gamaliel had many responsibilities and obligations to perform during the Feast of the Passover, and these would demand his undivided attention. Gamaliel desperately needed a good night's sleep. A very difficult chapter of his career had finally come to a conclusion and he could now devote his energies to more important matters... or so he thought!

The fact that the tomb was ordered sealed and guards dispatched to watch it on the following day, shows that the Jewish leaders did not sleep well after all (Matthew 27:62-66).

The High Priests and Pharisees might have gotten some fitful sleep following the Sabbath – if nothing else, from sheer exhaustion! But then came Sunday! The hastily called Sunday morning council meeting of the Great Sanhedrin must have been excruciating for Gamaliel. The soldiers were called upon to give a detailed account of what had happened. They testified, “The tomb is empty! We were there and witnessed everything! There was an angel!”

The High Priest would have scoffed at such a possibility, for he was a Sadducee and Sadducees believed neither in angels nor in a resurrection from the dead. The Pharisees believed both, but this news hardly gave Gamaliel and his fellow Pharisees cause for elation.

Normally, the guards should have been executed for failing to fulfill their obligation, but the Jewish leaders reasoned that people would claim that Jesus really had risen from the dead and that the Jewish leaders had eliminated the only witnesses. It was ultimately decided to do that which was neither appropriate, honest nor legal. They gave the soldiers “big money” to tell a self-condemning lie! *And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night,*

*and stole him away while we slept. And if this come to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and secure you (Matthew 28:12-14).*

### ***The Feast of Pentecost***

Sightings of the resurrected Jesus began to filter through to members of the Sanhedrin. This in itself would have been unsettling, but the unusual happenings during the Feast of Pentecost caused a sensation in the city.

About 120 followers of Jesus were congregated in a building somewhere in Jerusalem, apparently conducting an all-night prayer vigil. Suddenly “the sound of a mighty rushing wind” overwhelmed them, and what appeared to be flames of fire settled on those in attendance. Curious Jews, who had come to the feast from all over the world, heard the loud noise and ran to see what was happening so early in the morning! According to Acts 2:15, this happened before 6:00 AM. Although the followers of Jesus were speaking Aramaic, the others heard and understood in their own languages and dialects!

*And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God. And they were*

*all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this? (Acts 2:5-12)*

Seeing the crowd which had gathered, Peter stood up and spoke at length to the people. He first quoted messianic prophecies and then claimed that Jesus, whom the people had crucified, was the literal fulfillment of these. Following his message, Peter called on his listeners to repent of their sins and to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. More than 3,000 people publicly confessed Jesus to be the Christ and were baptized immediately. This must have consumed the rest of the day!

### ***A Humorous Incident***

Many people cannot imagine God having a sense of humor. I would like to insert a personal experience of ours that took place on Pentecost Sunday, 1998, in order to show that he actually does.

Pentecost is a major national holiday in Austria, which is celebrated Saturday through Monday. Actually, all Christians should at least celebrate Pentecost Sunday, for this is the birthday of the church. But Americans celebrate Memorial Day at this time of year and there is no room to squeeze in another holiday. Protestants should also celebrate Reformation Day on October 31, but that would interfere with Halloween!

While eating breakfast on Pentecost Sunday in 1998, we heard “the sound of a mighty rushing wind” outside! We ran to the window and looked to see where this noise was coming from. Imagine our astonishment to actually see people with “cloven tongues of fire” above their heads!

You are probably thinking the same thing that witnesses of the New Testament Pentecost thought. We were “full of new wine!” But I am telling the truth! The roaring sound and the tongues of fire came from the gas

burners of a large hot air balloon which passed our second story kitchen window and landed in a freshly mowed hay field near the house! And it was all perfectly timed for Pentecost Sunday morning while we were eating breakfast!

### ***The Last Straw — Saul's Conversion!***

Following his experience on the Damascus Highway, Saul broke with the Jewish establishment and joined with the Christians. His subsequent enthusiastic defense of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ must have dealt a devastating blow to all Jewish leaders, but most of all to his famous teacher, Gamaliel.

## CHAPTER 6

### GAMALIEL AND PAUL

The Apostle Paul (Saul of Tarsus) was born around 2 AD, converted around 37 AD and according to tradition, he was executed in 68 AD. Gamaliel was born around 30 BC and died about 50 AD. Based on these dates, we can assume that Gamaliel died 12-14 years after Paul's conversion.

Gamaliel definitely learned of Paul's conversion, but the apostle's later ministry, which was most effective, may not have been known to Gamaliel. In the eight years following his conversion, little was heard of Paul. He spent three years in seclusion somewhere in Arabia after which he returned to Damascus and preached with even more fervor. Leading Jews in the city seemed no longer willing to show the Christians tolerance, however, and they attempted to seize Paul. The believers helped him escape by lowering him from a window of the city wall in a basket by night.

Paul then traveled to Jerusalem where he was viewed with skepticism by Christians and Jews alike. It was only after the intervention of Barnabas that leaders of the young church were prepared to accept Paul as a brother. He stayed two weeks with Peter in Jerusalem (Galatians 1:17-19).

When Paul "spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed with the Grecians," they tried to kill him (Acts 9:29-30). This incident may have come to Gamaliel's attention, but it is possible that the famous Rabbi didn't realize that the Apostle Paul was the same person he had once instructed under the name of Saul.

Paul was escorted to the port of Caesarea, where he took a ship to his home city of Tarsus. Paul apparently went back to work in his family business of making tents. We know little about this period, but later – perhaps as much as five years later, Barnabas came to get him (Acts 11:25-26).

Barnabas talked Paul into accompanying him to Antioch. At first, Barnabas was the primary figure and Paul was simply his helper. During this period in Antioch, the church grew rapidly and soon boasted the second largest congregation of Christians after Jerusalem. It was here that the church first received recognition as Christians rather than as a Jewish sect.

Paul visited Jerusalem at least five times after his conversion and although Gamaliel would have been alive during the first four visits, he may not have been aware of these visits by his former student. I already mentioned the first visit, when he stayed with Peter. His second visit was to bring material aid from the Christians in Antioch to the needy brethren in Jerusalem. The third visit was to settle theological disputes (Galatians 2:2), and the fourth took place at the end of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:22).

### ***Paul's Final Visit to Jerusalem***

Around 57 AD, Paul came to Jerusalem a fifth time. Gamaliel had died several years previously, but his son Simeon II would have been a member of the Sanhedrin and perhaps *nasi* at that date.

Paul was recognized in the temple by Jews from Asia, who charged him with defiling the temple. The ensuing turbulence ended with Paul's beating and almost his death, but Roman soldiers intervened. He was put into prison and brought before the Sanhedrin the following day.

Paul began his defense before the Sanhedrin by declaring that he had lived in good conscience before God. The High Priest Ananias commanded someone to slap his face. Ananias obviously knew that Paul was once named Saul and that he had turned traitor to the Jewish cause and joined with the Christians. Paul had given testimony to this fact on the previous day in his speech before the mob.

Knowing that the Sanhedrin was made up of Pharisees and Sadducees, Paul brought up the issue of the resurrection, and a wild free-for-all broke out.

Luke writes that the Jews would have torn Paul to pieces if the soldiers had not rescued him (again!). But he was not yet out of danger. The following day, about forty men, probably Pharisees, made a secret vow to neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. Paul's sister learned of the plot and sent her son to warn Paul. Paul sent the lad to the Captain of the guard, who escorted Paul to safety in the Roman stronghold of Caesarea.

Unless they broke their vows, those 40 men starved to death! Two years later, Paul appealed to the Roman Emperor and was sent to Rome.

### ***The Importance of the Resurrection***

The Pharisees believed in a resurrection but the Sadducees didn't. This fact had little effect on their lifestyles, however. A similar situation exists in Christianity today. There are liberal Christians who don't believe in the miraculous and others who do, but one can see little difference in the way they live. All celebrate Easter and Christmas and few, if any, really expect to experience the supernatural.

The resurrection is important mainly to those who know they are about to die. As long as we enjoy a good life with many comforts and even luxuries, we are in no

hurry to die and the hereafter is not what we are here after. It is a much different situation in countries where Christians are persecuted. When this life offers only hardship, suffering and poverty, life beyond the grave becomes more important. To many, it is the only spark of hope. Not a few slaves in early American history became Christians, but in many cases they remained poor. When they grew old and were no longer useful for work, they were often left to die of sickness and disease. Slaves who experienced such conditions wrote the spirituals we love to sing, which look forward to the resurrection and a life in heaven with its pearly gates and streets of gold.

Being a devout Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus believed in the resurrection of the dead. But it was merely a doctrinal statement which held little significance for him. Following his life-changing meeting with the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus, however, this doctrine took on new meaning. He began immediately to preach the resurrection and soon became hated, persecuted and imprisoned by his ex-colleagues, the Pharisees. Paul's classical discourse on the resurrection in I Corinthians 15 shows the intensity of his studies on this subject. He repeatedly brings up the resurrection when being interrogated by Jewish leaders, knowing that they were divided on the matter. The writer of Hebrews also sheds much light on this subject, and some theologians believe that if it was not Paul who wrote the epistle, the author must have been influenced by him.

## CHAPTER 7

### GAMALIEL AND CHRIST'S BIRTH

The problem of tradition versus Scripture can be recognized in circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus. Although familiar with prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah, and in spite of the fact that each and every one of those prophecies was fulfilled by the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, Gamaliel and his colleagues could not bring themselves to accept Jesus as the Messiah. The wise men, shepherds and even King Herod believed the signs which pointed to the birth of the Christ, but the Jewish leaders were blinded by their own traditions. *Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition.* (Matthew 15:6).

The Christmas Story is in reality His story, which became history, but in this chapter, I will attempt to show how tradition blinded Jewish leaders to the truth in regards to the birth of their long anticipated Messiah.

#### ***1400 BC***

Let me take you back 3,400 years to a time when Israel is being led through the wilderness by Moses. In Numbers 21, we find Israel wandering through the desert as punishment for listening to faithless spies instead of Joshua and Caleb. In their quest for food, water and pasture for their flocks, they meander from one place to another, gradually moving northward. As they draw near to the countries of Moab and Ammon, Moses requests permission to pass through these kingdoms, and even promises to pay for food and water needed for their

journey. But the kings refuse to grant passage. Consequently, Israel circles around these nations, doing them no harm.

The Moabite and Ammonite kings must have felt rather smug in this cowardly reaction to their display of power, but they didn't realize why Moses had not declared war on them. In Deuteronomy 2, God warned Moses not to declare war against Seir, Moab and Amon. He had promised Esau and the children of Lot a territorial inheritance just as he gave Canaan to Israel.

Later, Moses sends messengers from Israel's camp in Jahaz to the king of the Amorites in Hesbon (about 20 miles distant). He requests permission to pass through his land just as he had requested of Moab and Ammon. He even makes reference to the fact that their journey around these countries was without incident. The Amorites had only recently taken this territory in conquest from Moab (Numbers 21:25-30) but the Amorite king stubbornly refuses to allow passage through his territory (Deuteronomy 2:26-37). This time, however, Israel declares war and easily defeats the Amorites. The nation is virtually exterminated in the devastating battle (verse 34).

King Og of Basan hears of Israel's victory and fears that he could be next. He sends his armies to fight Israel, perhaps surmising that Israel would be weak and tired after fighting the Amorites. But Og experiences the same fate as the Amorites.

As mentioned above, Israel had already passed around Moab without incident, yet Balak, King of Moab, begins to fear that Moses could seek revenge for the inhospitable treatment he had shown Israel. The once peaceful Nomads were now seen as a powerful and dangerous threat. Balak feels compelled to declare war on

Israel, but being a very superstitious man, he first seeks the services of a renowned sorcerer named Balaam.

### ***The Prophet Balaam***

Chaldea or Babylon (now Iraq) was famous for its sorcerers, astronomers and astrologers. Balaam lived and prophesied about 1,400 years before Christ in Pethor on the Euphrates River. According to Nahum 1:11, Balaam was from Nineveh. “Pethor” means “sorcerer” or “diviner,” so this passage should probably be rendered, “...sent to the city of sorcery, which lies on the Euphrates River”.

It is possible that the Edomite king, whose territory was to the south of Moab and north of Midean (Genesis 36:32), was Balaam’s brother. The names Mideanite and Moabite were often used interchangeably (see Num. 22:7, 31:2 and 25:1-6). The Moabite king kept Mideanite priests as his advisors, and it was perhaps these who referred him to Balaam.

Whatever the case may have been, Balak called for Balaam to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22-24). Balaam was warned by God in a dream not to go. Believing that Balaam was holding out for more money, Balak sent other messengers, offering to pay whatever Balaam should demand. This time, Balaam decided to go.

Isn’t it amazing, the extent to which some people will go in order to protect their wealth, health and lives when they are not even in danger? Unbelievers are usually superstitious and see everything accordingly. He who doesn’t fear God, fears everything and everyone.

After an eventful journey which included the appearance of an angel and a talking donkey, Balaam finally arrived in Moab. To the utter chagrin of the Moabite king, however, the famous Chaldean prophet could only bring forth blessings for Israel. After several

futile attempts to curse Israel, Balak commanded Baalam to cease his prophesies and return home. But God commanded Balaam to prophesy just one more time. This time he foretold the appearance of an unusual star which would announce the birth of a special ruler in Israel (Numbers 24:17).

The wise men of Matthew's gospel must have discovered the only yet unfulfilled prophecy of that famous Babylonian prophet, Balaam. Every prediction of this man had come to pass exactly as he had foretold (Numbers 22:6), but one of his prophecies was to be fulfilled in the distant future. It concerned the appearance of a unique star that would announce the birth of a special Jewish ruler.

### ***The Prophet Belteshazzar***

This unusual celestial appearance alone would not have provided sufficient reason for the wise men to set out on their long journey to Jerusalem. They were undoubtedly familiar with another unfulfilled prophecy of the famous Chaldean prophet, Belteshazzar, who lived about 800 years after Baalam. He is better known to us as the Prophet Daniel. It was acclaimed of both Baalam and Daniel (Daniel 5:12), that ALL their prophecies came to pass.

The wise men may have had access to Daniel's writings. Or they could have searched for clues in the gigantic collection of more than 100,000 clay tablets that were stored in the library of Nineveh. At least 30,000 of these still exist, most of them in a British museum. Many of these tablets have to do with observations of the stars. This is not surprising, considering the barren landscape of Chaldea. Studying stars in the cool of night would certainly be preferable to studying sand by the heat of day!

## ***The Seventy Weeks Prophecy***

When Jesus was born, Jewish Rabbis had been teaching that the time of the Messiah's appearance was close at hand. This teaching was drawn from Daniel's prophecy, which placed a time frame on the coming of that "special prince"- generally believed to be the Messiah. Daniel not only foretold the exact time in which a special Jewish monarch would arrive on the scene, he even prophesied that he would be executed without a fair trial (Daniel 9:24-26).

Daniel's seventy weeks prophecy (Daniel 9) has become known as the "backbone of Bible prophecy." The 70 weeks or 490 years (the Hebrew word denotes seven units of time and virtually all Bible scholars accept this interpretation) was broken down into 7 weeks, 62 weeks, and a final 70<sup>th</sup> week. The counting of these weeks was to begin with the decree of King Artaxerxes to rebuild Jerusalem (445 BC). At the culmination of the 69<sup>th</sup> week, the Messiah would be "cut off." Although there was some conjecture about what was meant by the words, "cut off," most Jewish scribes agreed that the appearance of the promised Messiah was very near.

In a book titled *The Coming Prince*, Sir Robert Anderson made exact calculations of this time period, allowing for leap years, differences in the Jewish calendar and the change from BC to AD. According to Anderson, the 69<sup>th</sup> year culminated with the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem shortly before his crucifixion. Because the Jews were not aware of calendar errors, their calculations were different, but the scribes and doctors of law were certain that the Messiah's appearance was imminent.

***"And when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his Son..." Galatians 4:4***

## ***The Wise Men Believed***

Six centuries after Daniel and fourteen centuries after Baalam, the Chaldean astronomers or “wise men” (this term is acceptable, for wise men still seek Jesus!) of Matthew’s gospel saw a unique new star and concluded that it had an important significance. One can imagine the excitement of these men when they discovered that two unfulfilled prophecies of their most famous prophets coincided exactly! No wonder they set out on their long journey of about 600 miles to Jerusalem! They fully expected to find a newborn prince in the palace of Herod the Great.

## ***Many Jews Believed***

Thanks to the diligent teaching of Jewish Rabbis and Doctors of Law, including Gamaliel, the people of Israel were in general expectation of the Christ at the time of his birth (Luke 3:15). Many wondered if John the Baptist could be the promised “Holy one of Israel.” Jewish leaders dispatched Levites and priests to Bethany near the Jordan River to investigate this possibility (John 1:19-27). Many residents of Jerusalem, including the aged Simeon and Anna, expected the imminent arrival of the Messiah (Matthew 2:3; Luke 2:25-40). According to Mark 15:43, Joseph of Arimathaea also anticipated the appearance of the Messiah.

## ***The Shepherds Believed***

Luke tells this story best:

*And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all*

*people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds (Luke 2:8-18).*

### ***King Herod Believed***

The arrival of the wise men in Jerusalem and their subsequent query about a newborn king of the Jews caused no small stir in Jerusalem (Matthew 2:3). King Herod inquired of the wise men the exact time of the star's appearance. He then called the leading theologians into his palace and asked where the Messiah was to be born. He took the acquired information so seriously, that when the wise men failed to report back to him as requested, he commanded that all babies two years and under in the environ of Bethlehem be killed.

***“Even the devils believe and tremble!”***

James 2:19

## ***The Pharisees Did Not Believe***

Since the Rabbis and Scribes had been predicting the arrival of the Messiah, one might think that the unusual happenings in Bethlehem, Jerusalem, the temple and in Herod's palace would have caused much excitement. But we find no evidence of any special emotion or anticipation on the part of the Pharisees and leading Jews regarding the possible birth of their long anticipated Messiah. They were so taken up with their own religious concepts and traditions that they couldn't recognize the truth when it stared them in the face! In fact, it seems that they almost dreaded the Messiah's intrusion into their factious fighting for theocratic supremacy in Israel.

## ***Jesus of Nazareth? Impossible!***

Nicodemus appears to have been a highly esteemed member of the Sanhedrin, for he is called "the teacher in Israel and a leader of the Jews" in John 3:1-2. Nicodemus had apparently been impressed by Jesus' teachings and miracles, but he was also concerned about his own image. He paid Jesus a visit in the night, when he wouldn't be recognized by others, but his motivation was clearly interest in the person and teachings of Jesus.

In one of numerous sessions of the Sanhedrin which dealt with the question of what to do with Jesus, Nicodemus attempted to come to his defense. His colleagues reacted promptly and with contempt. "Art thou also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet" (John 7:52).

Where did they get this idea? Although it was clear from scripture that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem and not Galilee, these men claimed that NO prophet could come from Galilee. Nazareth, Galilee and Samaria were despised by the Pharisees, and since Jesus was from Nazareth, the Jewish leaders concluded that he

could not possibly be a prophet and certainly not the promised Messiah.

The prophet Jonah was born in Gath-Hepher, which is only three miles from Nazareth, but he was held in disrepute by the Sadducees because he preached that God offered salvation to the Gentiles. The Pharisees were divided on that matter (see Chapter 18), but they too looked down on Jonah because he did everything in his power to escape obeying God. On one occasion, Jesus told the Pharisees that the only sign they would receive from God was “the sign of the prophet Jonah.” They would have viewed this as an open insult!

Upon being introduced to Jesus, Nathaniel asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” The poor reputation of Nazareth can be traced to the Pharisees’ diligent defamation of the city more than to historical facts about its citizenry. The terms “Jesus of Nazareth” and “the Galilean” were intended to be defamatory in nature, but Jesus readily accepted them. In fact, he never mentions his birthplace in Bethlehem and although he lived much longer in Capernaum than he did in Nazareth, he never claimed to be from that city. Most of his disciples were Galileans, and the apostles preached and performed miracles in the name of “Jesus of Nazareth.” In his post-resurrection appearance to Saul of Tarsus, Jesus revealed himself as “Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecuteth.”

### ***Tradition Wins – Truth Loses***

The Pharisees formulated their own rules which hindered them from recognizing truth. Jesus repeatedly pointed out their hypocrisy, but to no avail. They remained “blind leaders of the blind” (Matthew 15:13).

# PART II

The difficult situations in which Gamaliel found himself have been experienced by many religious leaders in the past two millennia. And they are definitely not uncommon today. I hope to motivate readers to seriously consider what their own action or reaction should be when faced with similar circumstances.

The second part of my book seeks to serve this purpose. We will begin where the first part of this book ended, with traditions, but this time our own.

## CHAPTER 8

### CHRISTMAS TRADITION

Someone has said that the human mind is like a parachute; it only functions when open. There is nothing that closes the mind more tightly than blind tradition. We are by nature creatures of habit. Habits and traditions can be desirable and beneficial, but only if they remain subject to the scrutiny of truth. When habits and traditions become hermetically sealed off from truth, we become their slaves rather than them serving us. We were not created to be enslaved, but to be free. Tradition that is independent of truth blinds our eyes and prevents a course correction.

Most accidents occur close to home because we are less apt to think in a familiar environment. We become so accustomed to certain rituals, conditions and circumstances, that we no longer feel the need to think.

It is the same with religion. The dictionary may define religion as “faith,” but 90% of that which is called religion is simply tradition. Faith requires serious thinking, deliberation and making choices, but many religious leaders don’t want their followers to think, deliberate or choose. And many “Bible-believing Christians” prefer a certain set of rules and traditions to that which the Bible says. We always sit in the same pew, pray the same formulated prayers and do things the way we always did them.

## *A “Holy” Christmas Carol*

We lived nearly three decades in Austria, where “Silent Night,” the most famous piece of music in the world was written. I did some research on the origin of this carol and shared findings with my friends — at least they were my friends! I made a few enemies by sharing the truth (see Appendix II).

It is, of course, very possible that a hungry church mouse chewed a hole in the bellows of the organ, leading to the writing of Silent Night, but there is no historical verification for this story. We are only told that the organ was in desolate condition.

Some protestants were upset to discover that a Roman Catholic priest and his organist co-authored “their” beloved carol! Catholics are not happy to discover that Joseph Mohr had a poor reputation among his peers, causing superiors to question his qualifications for the priesthood. The Prior of the Diocese where Mohr served objected to his appointment saying, “The curate priest Mohr acts immaturely, walking through the streets with a long tobacco pipe, his pouch at his side. Like the ship boys, he rides the river at flood stage, gambles, drinks and above all, he sings unedifying songs.”

The reference to gambling likely refers to a card game with stakes, called *schnapsen*, still popular in Austrian taverns. Oberndorf was a river port town. The “ship boys” were known to be a rowdy bunch, who rode the salt-laden ships from mines in Hallein to Linz, where it was sold on public markets. When the river was at flood stage, only the most daring would ride the barges and Mohr was known to do this. Apparently, the citizens of Oberndorf liked Mohr, for they insisted on keeping him as their priest!

I still like to sing “Silent Night” and knowing the truth has not diminished that fondness one bit. I also like

the old hymn “What a Friend we Have in Jesus” although the author apparently committed suicide. Having made a few more enemies, I will share my next enemy-making adventure. It seems that I never learn.

### ***A Controversial Christmas Quiz***

I made up a multiple choice quiz (Appendix I) about the first Christmas a few years ago, which traveled around the world by internet and was completed by perhaps 20,000 persons. Nearly everyone who took my quiz failed, including pastors and professors with doctorates in theology. When I attempt to show irate participants that some aspects of the Christmas story they believe are not biblical, many become indignant!

Most Christians seem to prefer tradition to clear Bible teaching. They believe, for instance, that three kings visited the manger in Bethlehem. Roman Catholics can even tell you their names and the color of their skin! The Bible simply calls them “magi” and says that they *came from afar*. Because they reported sighting a special star “in the East,” we must assume as any Jew of that period would have, that they were Chaldean star gazers from the region of Babylon.

It is true that Herod sent the wise men to Bethlehem to seek out the newborn baby, but they had hardly departed from the palace when the same star reappeared. The star did NOT lead them to Bethlehem, but it led them to the “house” where Jesus lived with Joseph and Mary. The wise men did NOT obey Herod; they obeyed God instead — as wise men still do (Matthew 2:9-12)! The house where they found Jesus was obviously located in Nazareth.

Jesus was circumcised at eight days of age, perhaps in Bethlehem but more likely in Nazareth. The Bible declares that Jesus was dedicated in the temple of

Jerusalem after the period of purification, which according to Leviticus 12:4, lasted 40 days. Following his dedication, the family “returned to Nazareth” (Luke 2:21-22 & 39). They also returned to Nazareth after their trip to Egypt (Matthew 2:23). Consider how much time it would have taken for the Magi to get to Jerusalem (about 600 miles) and for Joseph and Mary to get to Egypt and back (200 miles).

Some have argued that Jesus would not have been in any danger had he not been in Bethlehem. Only the children in the surrounds of this town were killed, so there would have been no need for Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt.

Let me first state that Jesus was never in any real danger! Many attempts were made on his life beginning with Herod, continuing with Satan himself during the wilderness temptation (Matthew 4) and often throughout his ministry (Luke 9:51, John 7:6-8 and John 8:59). When in seeming danger, Jesus declared that “his time was not yet come.” Being omnipotent, God could easily have kept Jesus safe from Herod’s baby-killing henchmen. Don’t you think that the army of angels which appeared to the shepherds could have warded off Herod’s soldiers? Jesus said at his crucifixion that he could summon two legions of angels (48,000-72,000) to rescue him from the cross, but his time had now come. Jesus prayed to his Father in heaven, “Not my will, but thine be done.”

One reason Joseph and Mary were commanded to travel to Egypt was so that scripture should be fulfilled (Matthew 2:15).

Another reason was that God probably wanted Joseph and Mary to live peacefully with their baby. Can you imagine what it would have been like for a nursing mother to be constantly anxious for her baby’s life? The slaughter of infants obviously took place several months after Jesus

was born. Even if Joseph and Mary had been living in Nazareth, they would have been struck with terror at the news of such a vicious attack designed to kill their special child. Herod was a hard calculator who didn't give up easily and left nothing to chance. The angel said, "Herod will seek the young child to destroy him" (Matthew 2:13). He was certain to learn sooner or later that his attempt to kill the newborn prince had failed!

Even though further attempts on the life of Jesus would have been equally doomed to failure, Joseph and Mary were human. Joseph was fearful even after God told them that it was safe to return home (Matthew 2:20-22). Our loving heavenly Father protected them from the anxiety and stress of a fugitive life by sending them to Egypt. He even provided them with gold (from the wise men) which would have sufficed for their travel expenses.

### ***“Don't Confuse Me With the Facts!”***

Many Christians today prefer “Christmas card theology” and traditions of human origin to the biblical account of Jesus' birth. Some Christians who took my quiz were so upset about my desecration of their manger scenes, that they even refused to read the Bible passages I gave them! It seems as impossible to get the holy family out of the manger in Bethlehem today as it was to find a room in the inn 2000 years ago!

## CHAPTER 9

### EASTER TRADITION

Christmas and Easter are the main Christian holidays and events associated with these occasions are explicitly recorded in the Bible. Still, most aspects of our Christmas and Easter celebrations are mere tradition and have little or nothing to do with the Biblical account.

Most would agree with me when I give Jingle Bells and Santa Claus as examples, but if I declare that neither kings nor wise men visited Jesus in the manger of Bethlehem, I am called a heretic! If I claim that eggs and rabbits have nothing to do with Easter, some would agree, but when I say that Jesus didn't die on Friday, I am worse than an infidel, destroying people's faith! You have borne with me in the chapters on Christmas; now please stay with me in the next two chapters. You may even decide that I could possibly be right after all!

#### *The Good Friday Tradition*

Although the crucifixion is generally believed to have taken place on a Friday, there are problems with this contention. The first problem is found in Matthew 12:40, where Jesus clearly states that he would be in the grave for "three days and three nights." By counting a few minutes of Friday and Sunday as two days, it would be possible to speak of one full and two partial days, but there can in no way be three nights. If we are to discount the one, how can we uphold the other? And if Jesus said that this is a special "sign," then it must be taken seriously!

The reason why Friday was determined as the day Jesus died is because of the statement in Mark 15:42, that

it was “the day before the Sabbath.” I agree with that statement, but few Christians are familiar with Jewish holiday traditions. The Sabbath mentioned was not a weekly Sabbath, but the first day of the Passover, which would have been considered a Sabbath no matter what day it fell on. John speaks of there being a “great Sabbath” in that year (John 19:31). Some expositors claim that this refers to a coinciding of the weekly and festive Sabbaths, but it more than likely indicates that there were two consecutive Sabbaths that year. This postulation would solve the aforementioned problem and indicate that Jesus was crucified on a Thursday.

### ***The Wednesday Theory***

Some theologians contend that Jesus was crucified on Wednesday. The best known of these is A.W. Tozer, who also concluded that Jesus was resurrected from the grave in the evening rather than early Sunday morning. Otherwise Jesus would have been in the grave longer than three days and three nights. Tozer believed that Jesus arose on Saturday at sundown, which would have been the beginning of the Jewish week.

### ***Palm Sunday Tradition***

The tradition which states that Jesus entered Jerusalem on a Sunday is based on the premise of a Friday crucifixion. According to John 12:1, Jesus traveled to Bethany six days before the Passover, or on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Nisan. He took part in a great meal in that town during which Mary anointed him with ointment worth a year’s salary. The triumphal entry is said to have taken place “the following day” (v.12), on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Nisan. The Bible, however, does not say that the triumphal entry into Jerusalem occurred on a Sunday. If it had, then the previous day would have been a Sabbath, and the distance

from Ephraim to Bethany, about 30 km, would be too far for a legal Sabbath day's journey (John 11:54; Acts 1:12). Nor would faithful Jews have prepared a "great meal" on the Sabbath.

We read in Mark 15:42 and John 19:14-42 that Jesus was tried, crucified and buried on the day of preparation for the Passover feast, which would have been the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan. Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus had to hurry with his burial because it was nearly sunset at the beginning of the festive Sabbath, the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan. This may be one reason why Joseph offered his own tomb for Christ's burial (John 19:38-39).

The 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan was a Friday and the 16<sup>th</sup> was Saturday, or the weekly Sabbath. Jesus was resurrected from the dead on Sunday morning, the 17<sup>th</sup> of Nisan. This means that he would have been in the grave three nights, but only part of the third day. This however, does not present a problem since Jesus prophesied that he would be resurrected "on the third day."

### ***Objections to a Thursday Crucifixion***

The King James Bible says, *Now the first day of the feast of unleavened bread, the disciples came to Jesus, saying unto him, Where wilt thou that we prepare for thee to eat the Passover?* (Matthew 26:17). For this reason, some argue that Jesus and his disciples celebrated the Passover feast like all other Jews.

The Greek merely says, "the first day of unleavened bread" and the word "feast" is inserted in italics. This is an important distinction, for the "feast of unleavened bread" was eaten on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan (after sunset), but the first day of unleavened bread was the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, the day of preparation.

John's Gospel speaks of a "supper" and even states emphatically that "it was not yet the Passover" (John 13:1-

2). Although this meal was not the regular feast of unleavened bread, it was celebrated as such because Jesus wanted it that way. He said, *I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.*(Luke 22:15).

He would be in the grave when the Jews ate their feast, but he yearned to partake with his disciples. It is interesting to note that Leviticus 23:5-6 says, *In the fourteenth day of the first month at even is the LORD'S Passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the feast of unleavened bread unto the LORD.*

According to John 13:30, it was already night when Judas left. The other disciples assumed that he was going shopping for things they would need for the actual Passover feast. The markets were still open. This would not have been possible if it had been on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, which was a holy day.

### ***About Jewish Sabbaths***

The Jews not only kept a weekly Sabbath day, but other holy days which were treated as Sabbaths. The first day of the three main festivals, the Passover, Feast of the Tabernacles and Pentecost, was always a holy day. The same rules applied to these holy days as pertained to the weekly Sabbath (Exodus 12:15-18; Leviticus 23:4-8 and Numbers 28:16-25).

The Feast of the Tabernacles lasted eight days, the first and last days being holy days. The “days of unleavened bread” during the Passover lasted seven days, the 15<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of Nisan being holy days. Although these holy days were not weekly Sabbaths or “seventh” days, they were often referred to as Sabbaths because they were treated as such.

## ***Rules of the Passover Feast***

Exodus 12 gives us the basic rules for the feast of the Passover. The month of Nisan was the first month of the Jewish year, which like all other months, began with a new moon. A perfect lamb was to be chosen for the Passover feast on the 10th of Nisan and masted until the 14th. By sundown on the 13th of Nisan, all leaven was to be removed from the homes. The lamb was slain on the afternoon of the 14th and eaten the same night (after sundown). Jewish days begin at sundown, so this meal would have been eaten on the 15th of Nisan (v.8). The first day of the Passover was always the 15th of Nisan (full moon). No matter which weekday the 15th of Nisan fell on, it was regarded as a Sabbath.

Before you toss this book into file 13, I want to say that there is a big difference between traditions based on misconceptions such as the examples I have given in this chapter and teachings which stand in direct opposition to scriptural truth.

No one will go to hell because he or she believed Jesus was crucified on Friday or because they thought the wise men found Jesus in the manger of Bethlehem. Jesus used extremely harsh language, however, in speaking to the scribes and Pharisees. He called them hypocrites, a brood of snakes and children of hell. He said they were full of wickedness and compared them to tombs filled with rotting corpses (Matthew 23). Jesus showed that many of the Pharisee's traditions and teachings were not only wrong according to the scriptures, but deadly and dangerous both for themselves and for those whom they influenced.

There is much more to learn from the biblical Easter account.

## CHAPTER 10

### HAPPY EASTER!

The word “Gospel“ means “joyful message” or “good news.” It is just that, but only because of Easter. The three main events of the Christian church are the birth, death and resurrection of Christ, but without that last event, the former would be of no significance.

There are many circumstances in the original Easter story and in our Easter celebrations today that might seem funny, hilarious or ridiculous, if they were not so tragic!

According to I Corinthians 15, our faith is worthless if there is no resurrection, yet millions of church members celebrate Easter who do not believe in a resurrection. How ridiculous!

In 1999, I conducted an Easter Sunday service in Austria. Among those in attendance was the director of a local college prep school who had two doctorates, one in philosophy and the other in theology. He said that his family enjoyed the service, so I asked him a few personal questions. It soon became clear that he didn’t believe in a resurrection of the dead. Upon further questioning, he argued that few educated people believed in a life after death. Because of his education and prominence, however, this man is often called upon to speak at Roman Catholic conferences and gatherings.

Scriptural accounts of the resurrection offer many opportunities to wonder about the sanity of those who deny the resurrection. Two followers of Jesus, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathaea, placed the mutilated body of Christ in a tomb and rolled a heavy stone across the

opening. Two female disciples watched the hurried embalming process from a short distance (Matthew 27:57-61; John 19:38-39). On the following day, the High Priests and Pharisees requested of Pilate that the tomb be sealed and a military watch be dispatched to prevent the disciples from stealing the body (Matthew 27:62-66).

If the disciples had planned to steal the body, they would have done so the evening before – or not have buried him in the first place! While the High Priests and Jewish leaders worried about the disciples stealing a corpse, those same disciples were hiding in a room with bolted doors and closed shutters for fear of being captured and killed!

It gets more ridiculous.

It is not clear how many soldiers watched the tomb. Pilate said to the High Priests, “Ye have a watch” which could mean that he sent Roman soldiers to guard the tomb. A Roman watch was composed of four soldiers, two of which would do guard duty while the other two slept. It is also possible that “Ye have a watch” referred to temple guards, which were at the disposal of the High Priests. A temple watch consisted of ten soldiers. I rather believe that both were present, because only some of them reported to the High Priests. If this is the case, there were fourteen soldiers who had the easiest job in the world — and got paid for it.

The apostle John gives us a vivid description of the turbulent scene at the tomb Sunday morning. Half the soldiers are sleeping or resting while the others have guard duty. In the early morning darkness, they hear footsteps and turn to see two women approaching, talking and carrying packages. Before the soldiers can ask any questions, there is a great earthquake, similar to the one that occurred three days earlier at the crucifixion. Now all the soldiers are wide awake and see a brilliant flash of

lightning. As their eyes adjust, they see a figure in snow-white garments sitting on the stone, and the grave had been opened!

On a recent trip to Turkey, we visited the caves and underground cities where early Christians had fled following persecutions in Jerusalem and elsewhere. I was especially impressed with the ingenious way in which massive stones were used to block passageways in the tunnels. The stones rolled into place quickly and easily, but they were just about impossible to remove, once in place.

It was not the earthquake that moved the stone from the grave, but an angel. And he didn't roll away the stone to let Jesus out. Jesus was already free! If Jesus could enter the room with locked and bolted doors where his fearful disciples were hiding, he didn't need anyone to let him out of the tomb. The stone had to be rolled away for the world to see. The soldiers were first to see the open tomb and began to shake all over. They then fell to the ground and "became as dead men."

Our son read these words when he was about ten years old. He came to me and asked, "What is the difference between "as dead men" and "like dead men?" I thought for a minute and gave an answer that has since become a family joke. I said, "If you smell as a dead man, you can't smell, but if you smell like a dead man, you stink!" It's okay to laugh; Happy Easter!

The soldiers smelled "as dead men" – they were clueless, but Jesus was alive and well! They had been guarding an empty tomb, for how long we do not know. That all depends on whether Jesus was resurrected Saturday evening at sunset or Sunday morning. I often wonder if they heard a commotion inside while Jesus untangled himself from the embalming wrappings and the head cloth. Perhaps he gave thanks to his Father in heaven

and sang a hymn or two. That would have made the guards edgy! Come on, you can at least smile!

While the soldiers were lying on the ground “as dead men,” the angel ignored them and spoke to the women. He instructed them to go tell the disciples that Jesus was risen from the dead and wanted to meet them in Galilee.

The women departed and the soldiers gradually came to their senses, staring at the empty tomb. Not only was the Roman seal broken and the stone rolled away, but the body they had been charged with protecting was also gone. They looked at each other with horror-filled eyes and then looked back at the tomb. They realized that they would likely face execution for failing to fulfill their responsibility.

Most of the soldiers fled for their very lives, but Jesus didn’t leave the area until he had assured the women that he was alive.

Some of the soldiers, probably those of the Temple Guard, went to the High Priests and unintentionally became the first post-resurrection evangelists. And the High Priests became the first to believe in the resurrection of Jesus. They called a special meeting of the Sanhedrin to discuss what should be done about it—not to determine if it had happened!

The High Priests and members of the Sanhedrin obviously believed the soldiers’ story, but it certainly didn’t seem like “good news” in their ears. Gamaliel would have been among those present when the Sanhedrin decided to pay the soldier-evangelists to go into all the world and preach another gospel!

Instead of receiving due punishment, the guards were paid generous bribes to lie about what happened! Can you imagine them dutifully spreading the word throughout the land? “We were charged with watching a tomb sealed with a Roman seal. We were to keep the corpse from

being stolen. But we slept on our watch and the disciples were able to break the seal and move the heavy stone without waking us. They got away with the body and we don't know where they put it. Even though we were sleeping, we know exactly what happened. Believe us!"

Why did the Jewish leaders believe the soldier's story? I personally think that the combined events of the passion week, from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and commotion in the temple when Jesus threw out the money changers and sellers of animals, to the solar eclipse, earthquake and rent temple veil, had all left an indelible impression on them. This was just one more unusual happening in a long chain of uncanny events which they had to deal with.

If the disciples had really attempted to steal the body, the armed and trained soldiers could easily have overpowered them. Historians tell us that the wrappings used to embalm a body weighed 100 pounds. Even if all eleven disciples had been present, who for the most part were tough fishermen, it would have taken several of them to move the stone and extract the body while the others held the soldiers at bay. The soldiers would have been handsomely rewarded had they prevented the disciples from stealing the body but sleeping while on watch was punishable by death.

People who heard this tale must have asked themselves why a search party had not been sent out to find the body and capture the disciples. The disciples could not have made very rapid progress carrying a corpse! Their capture would have been the best proof that the resurrection had not taken place. Even while the story of the soldiers was circulating, the disciples were preaching openly, and although they were arrested for preaching that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, they were never accused of stealing his body!

The Jewish leaders not only paid bribes to the soldiers for telling a lie, they also promised to bribe the Governor if he should get wind of the matter (Matthew 28:14). Both the soldiers and Jewish leaders could have faced execution for giving or receiving bribes.

After the terrible attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, I heard a prominent Austrian psychologist state over the radio, “One of the greatest dangers in our society is the belief in life after death.” He went on to explain that it was belief in a resurrection and afterlife in paradise that motivated Muslims to become suicide bombers. He conveniently overlooked or ignored the fact that most crimes are committed and wars are waged by people who, like himself, do not believe in a resurrection.

Both the denial of a resurrection and the belief in a resurrection that rewards killers of innocent men, women and children are destitute of all logic! The Sadducees didn’t believe in a resurrection and the Pharisees did, but together they demanded the worst possible form of death for a man who was totally innocent even by Pilate’s standards. And when their own paid temple guards gave testimony to his miraculous resurrection from the dead and reported seeing an angel, both Sadducees and Pharisees collaborated to bribe them generously to tell a blatant lie!

When we stop to think about it, the followers of Jesus present the best case against the resurrection of Christ. Consider the following facts:

- Mary Magdalene knew Jesus very well, yet she didn’t recognize him at all. She thought he was the gardener.
- Two of his disciples spoke with their resurrected Lord for hours while walking with him to Emmaus. They assumed he was a stranger!

- The disciples who wrote the gospel accounts admitted to their own fearfulness. They were hiding in a locked room and when Jesus appeared, they thought they were seeing a ghost!

The Jewish leaders, however, describe the disciples as bold, brave and courageous fighters who managed to outsmart and outrun a bunch of trained soldiers.

At least one of the soldiers must have become a Christian, but there were likely several. From the time Jesus was taken captive in Gethsemane until his resurrection, he was constantly surrounded by soldiers. Many details would not be known to us if at least one soldier had not been converted and told the disciples (Mark 15:16-20 for example). We do know that a centurion and others recognized Jesus to be the Son of God (Matthew 27:54).

### ***God's Wonderful Parable***

Jesus was known for his many parables, and I believe that the Jewish Passover feast is God's own parable of the ultimate sacrifice — the “Lamb of God” was sacrificed for the sins of man. It is really too bad that Gamaliel was blinded to the beauty of this wonderful parable.

**CHOOSING THE LAMB:** Jesus was welcomed with shouts of *Hosanna* when he entered into the city of Jerusalem on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Nisan. This was the appointed day for the selection of a lamb without blemish which would be offered as a sacrifice for sin. Pharisees told Jesus to forbid what they perceived to be “blasphemous” activity, but Jesus responded by saying that if they remained silent, the rocks would cry out (Matthew 21:8-9 and Luke 19:39-40)!

CLEANSING THE HOUSE OF LEAVEN: Before the feast of the Passover could be celebrated, the house had to be cleansed of all leaven. All homes were to be searched on the 13<sup>th</sup> of Nisan to ascertain that no trace of leaven remained by the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup>, when the lamb was slain and the Passover meal prepared.

The Apostle Paul gave this practice new meaning for Christians: *Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth* (I Corinthians 5:7-8).

Sometime after his arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus went into the temple and bodily threw out the money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals. I would like to believe that the “cleansing of the temple” took place on the 13<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, but the Bible doesn’t really say. It is quite likely, however, because this would have been the time when most pilgrims were buying animals and exchanging money.

An explanation is in order here. Jewish leaders insisted that the tribute money required of every adult be paid in the special coinage of the sanctuary. The same was true for purchasing (over-priced) animals for sacrifices. This money was only available at exorbitant exchange rates from official money changers who sat in Solomon’s Porch or the Court of the Gentiles. Jewish leaders should have forbidden such an unethical practice, for it was explicitly forbidden in Proverbs 20:23 and other Old Testament passages. Instead, they actually endorsed the practice because it had become a lucrative source of income.

**THE DAY OF PREPARATION:** The 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan was the day of preparation for the feast of unleavened bread. The Passover was to remind Israel of God's salvation by sacrificing a perfect lamb, and it was on this afternoon that the Passover lamb was to be slain.

Ever since Adam and Eve sinned, all nature has been under the curse of sin. There has, consequently, never been a perfect sacrificial lamb. All those millions of animals sacrificed in Old Testament times could only be symbols of the perfect Lamb of God which would someday be slain for the sins of all mankind.

The disciples celebrated the feast of the Passover with the very Lamb of God! After the crucifixion of Christ, no further sacrifice would be necessary for the forgiveness of sin (Hebrews 10:12-18). At this meal, Jesus washed the disciples' feet and shared the cup and bread with them as symbols of his ultimate sacrifice for their sin.

After Jesus ate the meal with his disciples, he went into the garden of Gethsemane to pray. While he prayed, sweating great drops of blood, three disciples who accompanied him slept. Shortly afterwards he was betrayed by Judas and taken captive by the soldiers. He was persecuted throughout the night. A crown of thorns was pressed onto his head. Soldiers spit on him, beat him and mocked him.

When it was morning, the cock crowed and Peter went out and wept bitterly. The Day of Preparation had dawned. On this day, Jesus was tried and pronounced "not guilty" three times, yet in order to appease the Jews, Pilate delivered him to the executioners. It is interesting to note that a murderer called Barabbas (the name means "son of the Rabbi") was released at that time! Jesus was crucified in the third hour and he died at the ninth hour. There was a great darkness and an earthquake. The crucifixion of

Christ took place at the very time in which the Passover lamb was normally slain!

Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus placed his body in the tomb shortly before sunset on Thursday, the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan.

**THE CELEBRATION:** The 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan began Thursday evening at sundown. This was the first day of the Passover and a holy day. The Jews celebrated their deliverance from bondage in Egypt.

Following the death and burial of Christ, Jewish leaders celebrated their victory by eating the Passover meal. In that first Passover night, God's people were instructed to be prepared to flee at a moment's notice. Exodus 12:11 says, *And thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste: it is the LORD'S Passover.* Certainly this described the anxious disciples hiding behind bolted doors.

Today, we celebrate the Lord's supper looking back on the cross. *For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come* (I Corinthians 11:26).

But we are also partakers with him in the present. We are told to contemplate what it may cost us to be faithful. Jesus told his followers that they must take up their cross and follow him (Matthew 16:24). The Lord had not yet been crucified when he made that statement but the disciples knew exactly what he meant.

Finally, the Lord's supper looks ahead — *till he comes*. Jesus is coming again, and we must wait patiently.

**AN INTERIM OF WAITING:** The 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of Nisan were days of rest. The Pharisees, Sadducees, High Priests and Scribes rested from the strenuous activities of the past

few days. Only the Levite priests fulfilled their normal obligations in the temple. The body of Christ had been laid to rest in the tomb and his spirit was resting in Paradise. The disciples awaited their uncertain destiny in a room with the doors secured. Several of the women were waiting for the Sabbath to end in order to buy embalming spices. Soldiers waited at the tomb. Theirs was an easy task, preventing frightened disciples from attempting to move the heavy stone and steal the body of Jesus.

We too must wait while evil men seem to be in control. Waiting is not easy and it tests our faith, often to its limits. Although the price has been paid for our sins, eternal life is assured us and the enemy was defeated on the cross, we must wait and endure until that glorious appearing of our Savior.

**THE RESURRECTION:** The gospels give varying accounts of what happened early Sunday morning and Bible critics delight in pointing out the minor differences in these eyewitness reports. Mark and Luke speak of three women while Matthew mentions two Marys and John only speaks of Mary Magdalene. Three gospel writers mention two angels but Matthew only one. What is of utmost importance, is the proclamation of the angels and witness of the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead!

Mary Magdalene stood near the empty tomb weeping. There was much she could not understand. Jesus asked, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Mary thought he was the gardener. Why the gardener? Might he who would not break a bruised reed (Matthew 12:20), have been straightening flowers which the soldiers had trampled under foot in their hasty retreat from the tomb?

Jesus then called her by name, “Mary!” Only then did she begin to understand (John 20:1-16).

THE MYSTERY OF IT ALL: There are portions of the Bible that I do not comprehend, but God only expects me to obey what I do understand. I refuse to place myself in a position above the Bible. I subject myself to God’s Word and blame my own inability to understand rather than question the Bible’s credibility.

Like the patriarch Job, I personally know that my Redeemer lives. He calls me by name and leads me like a shepherd through dark valleys and on mountain tops. He answers prayer and gives peace and joy in spite of difficult circumstances. This cannot be understood by anyone who does not believe.

Some call me a fool for believing, but after nearly half a century of living for and serving Christ, I don’t regret a moment of it and encourage others to do the same. If I have been deceived, I certainly didn’t miss anything good and I’ve been spared much evil. People should be thankful that I was somehow deluded at 19 years of age in a Memorial Day service at Camp Haluwasa, in Southern New Jersey. They should be happy that my life took a dramatic turn for the better! Those drug addicts who were freed from the chains of addiction during our years of youth work in Linz, profited immensely by my “delusion.” The young people who were trained in our Bible Institute to become missionaries, pastors and Christian workers, have enjoyed the blessings of their “delusion” as have those individuals whose lives were touched by these graduates.

No, it is not those who give their lives in service to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who are deluded and missing out on life. People who attempt to live godlessly are to be pitied. They have nowhere to turn for

comfort and help when life takes a bad turn and no one to thank for sunshine, rain and the beauty of nature.

Perhaps you believe that Jesus is dead. You believe the soldier's fantastic tale, that they saw the disciples break the seal and roll the heavy stone from the tomb and steal a corpse while they slept. Or you may deny that Jesus was crucified or that he ever existed. Perhaps you believe the disciples wrote those unflattering tales of their own failures and weaknesses in order to win a following. Are you any better off for believing that? Or does your belief allow you to live immorally, to be dishonest, untruthful, and to seek your own advantage at the expense of others?

If so, you are not much different from the Pharisees of Jesus day. They concocted their own religion which allowed them to take advantage of poor pilgrims for their own enrichment. They ridiculed and slandered the innocent, the righteous and repentant sinners. They robbed orphans and widows while praying pious prayers. They tortured and crucified a man whom they knew had done no wrong. They paid bribes to the traitor Judas and lying soldiers, and when they were finished, they sat down to enjoy their religious feasts - just like many hypocrites do at Christmas and Easter today.

A sealed tomb could no more contain the living Christ than a barricaded room full of scared disciples could prevent him from entering, but disbelief can keep him out of your heart and life. I prefer to believe, for even when I doubt, Jesus breaks through and assures me of his living presence!

## CHAPTER 11

### FEAR-PRESSURE

One problem which affected Gamaliel was the fear of what others thought of him, his peers in particular.

The term “peer-pressure” is generally used only in relationship to young people and there is no equivalent of this term in the German language. In much of the twentieth century, European youth didn’t make decisions about what clothes they wore or choose their own careers. They did what their parents wanted and wore the clothes Mama and Papa bought for them. Almost overnight, this has changed, but rather than create a new German word, the English term “peer pressure” was adopted.

The German word *menschenfurcht* has basically the same meaning as peer-pressure, but it is used in relationship to adults. Oddly enough, just as there is no German word for peer-pressure, neither is there an English equivalent for *menschenfurcht*. *Menschenfurcht* is composed of two very common words meaning “people” and “fear.” It means fear of what other people think or expect of us. We use an entire phrase like, “the felt need to keep up with the Joneses” to describe this motivation. I will call it “fear-pressure” in this chapter, because it aptly describes the situation among the Pharisees of Jesus’ day and it depicts a major dilemma among Christians today.

In Austria, *menschenfurcht* or fear-pressure demands that one be out of bed by 6:00 A.M., keep windows and yards spotlessly clean and have colorful flowers in the window boxes. That is great for tourism, but fear-pressure can be a merciless dictator with demanding expectations. The loss of a drivers license or a financial setback in

business is more than some people can bear and they commit suicide. Not a few students take their own lives after receiving a poor grade in school.

In America, fear-pressure is sometimes called “political correctness” Our oldest son works for the state government and was once reprimanded for saying something that was not politically correct. His response was even less politically correct. He said, “If it’s politically correct, it’s probably a lie.”

### ***Peer- vs. Fear-Pressure***

Young people don’t wear rings in their noses, cheeks, eyebrows, belly buttons or tongues because it feels good. Piercing and tattooing are presently “in,” so kids willingly go through this ordeal in order to be accepted.

Adult fear-pressure is little different from peer-pressure among kids and teenagers. We are equally concerned about our personal appearance, business success and social recognition. I normally wear a suit and tie to church, not because it feels good or because God commands it, but because this is what I and some others consider to be proper attire. I worked a lot with youth in Austria and often wore jeans, which are much more comfortable and practical. I doubt if I offend anyone by wearing a suit, but I don’t criticize those who exercise their freedom in Christ by wearing more comfortable clothing to church. A friend once told me that he sees no reason to wear a noose around his neck just because 94

Rabban Gamaliel others do it!

The extent of discomfort some people endure and the risks they take in order to achieve approval or avoid the reproach of their peers is simply amazing. Fear-pressure is the biggest single cause of heart attacks, ulcers, silicon breast implants and maxed-out credit cards. Manufacturers and sellers of cosmetics, pharmaceuticals and luxury items earn billions from fear-pressure.

All of us are to some degree affected by what others think or expect of us, and this need not be wrong. If we are motivated by an attitude of servitude, love, concern and compassion, this may be commendable. Anyone who seeks to obey and honor God will be sensitive to the needs of his creation. True Christians try not to pollute their environment, waste resources, abuse the animal kingdom or cause offense to their fellow citizens.

### ***Gamaliel and Fear-Pressure***

Gamaliel not only feared the disapproval of his peers, but he also feared that he might fail to meet God's exacting standards. He was obviously serious about serving God, but valued his reputation and prestige among fellow Pharisees more. Torn between the consensus of his peers and having a good conscience before God, he was not always able to get his priorities straight. He tended to seek compromises or to encourage tolerance rather than to take a firm stand based solely on scriptural principles and a personal conviction of truth.

Gamaliel's position of prominence placed him under an extraordinary amount of pressure. Whenever a divisive matter could not be settled by the Torah, Oral Law, or by referring to a previous pharisaical ruling, it would be brought before the Jewish leaders for resolution. Gamaliel was the number one Pharisee and the burden of responsibility and super-human expectations made of him

must have placed him under much duress. Others could pass the buck, but not Gamaliel.

Success leads to increased expectations, which bring even more stress. I can imagine that the super-human demands made of Gamaliel often left him exhausted and frustrated. He would have feared the consequences of making a wrong decision which could not only prove disastrous for his career, but also cause problems for those who placed their confidence in his wisdom and judgment.

The apostles told members of the Sanhedrin, “we must obey God more than men.” They loved God and that was their motivation. It cost them imprisonment, beatings and in most cases, their very lives; but it was the right thing to do, so they did it. Gamaliel sought a compromise which would meet the approval of men and not be offensive to God, but he failed miserably while the apostles succeeded.

The proper reaction when others expect too much of us would be to admit our human limitations and appeal to God for wisdom. But pride resists such a solution. Gamaliel’s only perceived recourse was to mediate and formulate compromise solutions. He probably felt that by avoiding absolute and dogmatic judgments, he would not place his reputation with man in jeopardy and at the same time avoid incurring the wrath of God.

Diplomatic mediation has its place, but we must be prepared and willing to take certain risks with our reputation when defending the truth. As mentioned in Chapter 8, Nicodemus took a bold stand when he attempted to defend Jesus before the Sanhedrin. His colleagues promptly ridiculed him. Simeon too may have been posthumously ostracized by his fellow Pharisees. If the son of Hillel and father of Gamaliel was really that God-fearing man of Jerusalem who pronounced Jesus to be the Messiah, this would explain why he received no

honorable mention in Jewish records, despite the fact that he served as President of the Sanhedrin. But both these men have received greater recognition in the pages of scripture.

### ***Self-Inflicted Fear-Pressure***

There is a fine line of distinction between the desire to do what is pleasing to God and a fear of doing what might offend him. We should obey out of love for God and the truth, not for fear of reprisal, punishment or rejection. Those who do the former are not overly concerned about the latter, nor are their efforts motivated by prospects of receiving rewards or remuneration for their deeds. If our actions are motivated by love, the response is not important.

I know a Christian who obeys every traffic law meticulously, who is painfully accurate in his conversation, punctual at all meetings and who strives for perfection in church ministries for which he is responsible. He obviously receives a certain degree of satisfaction in the knowledge that he is doing everything right. But he is lonesome, seems unhappy and has few close friends. And he can't understand why this is so, except to conclude that this is normal for anyone who "walks the straight and narrow way."

I admire the desire of my friend to please God, but would question his motivation and understanding of what God expects of us. He seems to be driven by self-inflicted fear-pressure, which not only robs him of joy and the blessings of fellowship with God and other believers, but also seriously limits his fruitfulness.

As Jesus pointed out, the legalism of the Pharisees made life more difficult for the Jews, but it also made life difficult for themselves. That is why they were so adept at inventing ways to get around their own laws. It is always

simpler to obey a set of rules than to live by personal faith and trust in God, especially if you create the rules yourself!

Self-inflicted fear-pressure can hardly be called peer-pressure. The friend described above seems to pride himself in the fact that he does not acquiesce to what others think. In his own eyes, he is “boldly and faithfully doing what is right in God’s eyes.” It is also true that he tends to have a critical attitude towards those who don’t subject themselves to the same standards of perfection. The inherent dangers of spiritual perfectionism are the tendencies to be proud, to be critical of others and to dread not meeting God’s expectations.

Those of us who desire to serve God place ourselves in the line of fire. The devil and those who are under his influence won’t like it one bit. We will be unjustly criticized and smeared, but what is even more difficult to bear is the just criticism we receive. In attempting to serve and obey God, there is a very good likelihood that we may “miss the mark” and do something wrong. According to the clear teaching of the Bible, this is “sin.”

In seeking to serve God, we will obviously do our best to obey him, but before we can do either, we must get to know God better. Our faith in a loving, understanding and forgiving God must be greater than our fear of doing something wrong. That kind of faith comes only from a close relationship with him.

Perfection is important, but it is simply non-obtainable in this life. In the process of seeking to please God, we “get dirty.” Proverbs 14:4 says, *Where no oxen are, the crib is clean: but much increase is by the strength of the ox.* If a child never takes those first stumbling steps, it can never learn to walk. A Christian who witnesses may say the wrong thing, but keeping quiet is the greater evil, and criticizing those who witness is the worst sin.

Many readers may be familiar with individuals like the friend described above. You may call them pharisaical or legalistic, but criticism is all-too-often motivated by a lax attitude towards God's Word. I would rather be punished for trying too hard than for not caring! And I would prefer to be labeled a "legalist" or "Pharisee" than to be subjected to God's judgment for disobedience or for judging others. Neither those Christians who pride themselves with having a spotless vest, nor their critics produce the kind of fruit that God is looking for.

The parable of the vine and the branches in John 15 illustrates this point well. The branch that produces no fruit is cut off and burned. A branch which produces fruit will be pruned so that it produces more and better fruit. Many understand this part but fail to grasp the main teaching of this parable. The object of the vine and branches is clearly to produce fruit, but the manner in which fruit is produced is often completely overlooked. The secret is in "abiding," not trying hard! The branch is only able to produce as the vine enables.

### ***My Own Battle With Fear-Pressure***

Christian leaders are the prime targets of this satanic trap which robs us of our "joy in serving Jesus" which we sing about. This kind of fear-pressure is fueled by our own high expectations, but it is misconceived as striving to meet God's standards. Self-inflicted and unmerciful, the fear of not meeting God's expectations plagues many well-meaning individuals. I am no exception.

In the summer of 1994, nothing seemed to be going right for me, and I experienced what people call a "mid-life-crisis." I was 56 at the time, but I doubt if I will live to be 112!

Before I continue, I want to share a part of my life which is not very nice to contemplate. I started out okay,

with a wonderful childhood, a physically fit body and above average gifts. I learned to work at an early age and could soon accomplish just about any task that presented itself.

At nineteen years of age, however, I cared nothing about God and church. I was only interested in cars. It was my obsession with cars that frequently got me into trouble. Twelve points worth of traffic violations were sufficient for the revocation of a driver's license, but I harvested 22 points faster than the police could count. Before I lost my license, I was taken to court for another incident in which I had broken a long list of laws, not the least of which was outrunning the police. The officer chasing me didn't get my license number, so I might have gotten off the hook had I been able to prove that there was another pink convertible with flames painted across the hood and down the sides. I wound up not only losing my driver's license, but my car and every penny of savings.

I was devastated, but God mercifully reached down and spoke to me in that situation - at first gently and then with more firmness. Fortunately, he opened my eyes to my rebellion and sinful ways, and I asked God to forgive me and make whatever he could out of my messed up life.

I enrolled in college, obtained a degree in Bible and found a wonderful wife. God gave us an interest in Europe and after joining a mission, we departed for Austria with our six-month-old son. A little brother and a sister were added in Austria. My wife and I worked well as a missionary team for nearly four decades. We prayerfully set goals for our ministry and strove to fulfill the "Great Commission" to the best of our abilities. We had every reason to believe that God would bless our ministry, and for many years, he did.

Now let's come back to 1994 and my mid-life crises. As Field Director for our mission, I felt that I should be

setting a precedent for our missionaries, yet our co-workers were enjoying fruitful ministries while everything I was involved in was producing little or no fruit. Enrollment in the Bible Institute which we had founded ten years earlier was at an all-time low. There were myriad problems in the church we served, and we had to close our printing and publishing operation after a dozen great years. I was very discouraged!

During this difficult time, I prayed every morning that the Lord would give me some promise or encouragement from his Word, but no matter what I read, it seemed to mock me. One morning, I read in Matthew 7, *Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?*

I became angry and threw my Bible onto the coffee table, verbalizing pent up frustrations in angry accusations against God: “No earthly father would treat his son like you treat me! Here I am trying my best to accomplish YOUR work, but you don’t seem the least bit interested!”

I was shocked at my own words. Did I have no fear of God whatsoever? I wondered why God didn’t strike me dead! That incident brought me to my knees and I asked God to forgive me for my foolishness, but the problems remained. In fact, a new problem now plagued me. How could I consider myself to be a child of God if I dared to accuse the eternal, almighty, ever-present, all-knowing, holy and righteous God of being unfair?

While preparing a sermon, I came across Psalm 111:10 which says, *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have they that do his commandments. his praise endureth forever!* I was a missionary, devoted to doing His commandments, yet I not only lacked the fear of the Lord, but wisdom to boot! Nor was I in any mood to praise God! And here I was, attempting to prepare a sermon!

I continued reading in the next chapter, and the first verse was an instant replay of the same message - only in reverse order! *Praise ye the Lord. Blessed is the man that feareth the Lord, that delighteth greatly in his commandments.* I could find no enlightenment for my miserable condition. Could anyone have delighted more than I in God's commandments? Had I not gladly left family, friends and homeland in order to fulfill the great commission? Certainly that was not my problem!

At a conference of Christian workers, I confided my feelings of failure and frustration to a missionary friend from another mission. I was shocked when he told me, "I have been going through a crisis myself and even asked God why He didn't allow me to have a fruitful ministry like yours!"

### ***It Got Worse!***

While these thoughts plagued me from within, I was dealt several more painful blows from without.

The exchange rate for the dollar had been falling, and we were receiving 30% less than ten years previously. Inflation made it even worse. We had promised \$180 per month to support various ministries, and this added burden strained our budget to the limits. A church in America promised to sponsor an Albanian student in our Bible Institute to the tune of \$100 per month, but when we received nothing after several months, I wrote the church

a tactfully formulated letter asking about the money. The treasurer replied that we could use our annual Christmas gift from the church for that purpose. That money lasted one and a half months. We continued support payments from our personal resources, but I was definitely not a *joyful* giver!

In order to pay bills, we grudgingly gave up our planned camping vacation and placed a classified ad in the paper for items that we thought we could do without. Only one item sold, and we got just enough money to pay for the newspaper ad!

Our landlord then informed us that he was going to raise our rent by 25%. Soon after that came the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. I received word that my mother was in the hospital ICU and not expected to live. I disintegrated!

Bitterly accusing God of letting me down, I sold the car we had purchased only six months earlier in order to pay our debts and purchased airline tickets with what was left. After our son Richard's wedding and the annual Bible Institute Board Meeting, we flew to America.

I had no intention of returning.

### ***Fearing God Without Being Afraid***

I had been asked to speak in one of the sessions of our mission's Leadership Training Conference and there seemed no way to back out at this late date, so I went. The Bible passage designated for my session was II Peter 1:1-11 and this text proved to be a major factor in bringing me out of my crisis.

The first four verses name seven gifts, and verses 5-7 list seven things that we are told to add to these seven gifts:

## ***Seven Gifts: Faith, Peace, Total Sustenance, Promises, Partnership and Deliverance***

*Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have **obtained** like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ: Grace and peace be **multiplied** unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, According as his divine power hath **given** unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are **given** unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be **partakers** of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.*

1. **Faith:** The word “obtained” in verse one could be misleading, for faith is a gift and cannot be earned. A better rendering would be “received” or “imparted.” Other usages of this word in the New Testament have to do with casting lots. Winning a lottery involves no special effort or skill, although some seem to think their lucky charm helps.
2. **Grace:** Grace is not merely the remission of sin, but more importantly, it is a great opportunity for fellowship with Christ and sharing in his work. The word “multiplied” could better be translated, “given abundantly.”
3. **Peace:** Peace is not just assurance of God’s forgiveness, but an abiding assurance that He is with us and will not forsake us in time of trouble. This gift, like Grace, is given generously - “multiplied unto us!”
4. **Total sustenance:** We are given everything pertaining to life and godliness. Our total sustenance is assured us through Christ.
5. **Promises:** When God makes promises, they are “exceeding great and precious” (not like politicians!)

Why then don't we get excited about His promises? Why don't we claim them? After all, they are free gifts!

6. **Partnership:** Have you ever considered what that means? We are "partakers in His divine nature;" branches on the vine, His workmanship, His body, His ambassadors, His light and salt and we shall reign with Him eternally!
7. **Deliverance:** "Having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust." The world can offer nothing good that was not from God in the first place. Satan tempts us with that which has been corrupted (Psalm 81:11-16).

All of these seven gifts come from Jesus and God, but gifts 2, 3 and 4 are come to us "through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord." Peter doesn't mention "knowledge" in relationship to faith because man's knowledge of God cannot produce faith. Only God's righteousness does that. Knowing God and Christ (verse 2) is equivalent to the "like precious faith" mentioned in verse one. Jesus said, "Without me ye can do nothing." Faith is a gift of God, and everything else is received through knowing God and Jesus Christ. Faith doesn't guarantee material blessings, comfortable surroundings or success in our undertakings. Nor is the fulfillment of certain rituals or obeying God's commandments a prerequisite for faith.

Verses 5 through 7 are strikingly different. Peter gives us another list of seven things, but they are NOT gifts! These must be diligently sought after and acquired. He starts out with the words, "beside this," referring to that which is given us in the previous verses. He then tells us that we must "diligently add" these items to what we have been given.

***Seven “Add-Ons”: Virtue, Knowledge, Temperance, Patience, Godliness, Kindness and Love.***

*And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*

(II Peter 1: 5-7)

Faith in God is an absolute prerequisite for the attributes mentioned here. But we dare not be content with simply knowing him; we need to add to what we have been given. We must have something before we can add to it, but that which is added is our responsibility and not God's.

It is a command and not an option. We are not to be content with simply having faith. Peter assures us that this is not an easy job. Winston Churchill coined the term “blood, sweat and tears,” which would be a fitting definition of what God requires of us.

Like those colorful plastic boxes which children play with or the carved wood figurines made in Russia, that fit neatly inside of each other, these seven attributes are inter-related and given in a specific order.

1. **Virtue:** (moral excellence or purity) In II Timothy 2:20- 21, Timothy speaks of many kinds of vessels in a household. There are vessels of gold and silver, but also of clay. All are useful to the master of the house, but it is imperative that they be kept clean or “purged.” Your garbage can may not be the first thing you show guests who enter your home, but you wouldn’t want to do without one - provided it is frequently cleaned. Religion is poisonous venom without purity. It is important to recognize that virtue must be “diligently obtained.”
2. **Knowledge:** This is not the saving knowledge of God mentioned in the first four verses, but rather the knowledge of truth. The knowledge of truth comes as the result of intensive study of God’s Word. Virtue must have precedence over knowledge, for knowledge without virtue is the makings of a check forger!
3. **Temperance:** Not just abstinence from intoxicating drinks, but in ALL things! Gluttony is sin as is overindulgence in the comforts of life, television, computers or anything else. Temperance is hard work and demands much self-discipline, especially in our affluent society.
4. **Patience:** How often do we wish for more patience! But patience is not a gift and it doesn’t come easy. It requires great effort and if anyone had to learn that, it was the Apostle Peter!
5. **Godliness:** Five minutes of quiet time and five hours of TV will never produce godliness. Note that godliness is packaged in patience! Instant gratification of selfish desires does not produce godliness! It comes from “waiting upon the Lord.”
6. **Kindness:** Friendliness, generosity and hospitality are held in high esteem in the Bible. Our standard wedding gift to young couples is a nice gold-edged guest book.

We imprint the scriptural admonishments to be hospitable in the front. Kindness does not come naturally but takes effort.

7. **Charity:** (*Agape*-love - Giving of self) No one can do this for us. It is completely voluntary, yet God commands us to love one another! We often misunderstand the meaning of “voluntary.” The word comes from “will” and refers to control over our bodies. The biblical idea of love (charity) is different from ours today. Love and hate are emotions to us, but the Bible idea is a stance, position or attitude of determination. He or she who determines to love, automatically “hates” (in Greek, this is positional; we disregard all that could detract from our love). Jesus said that in order to love God with all our hearts, we must be willing to disregard or “hate” others, even our own parents.

The thought occurred to me as I studied this passage, “Isn’t Peter missing something?” My missionary work (witnessing, preaching, giving, serving and counseling) is not even mentioned here!

As I examined my own life, searching for these seven qualities, I couldn’t find much to brag about. At first I thought I could claim to have knowledge, but it is knowledge of Christ that Peter is talking about. And I didn’t have much of that!

Verse eight hit me like a ton of bricks! “If these things be in you and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful.” Wow! My life was certainly barren and unfruitful, but I had only been thinking in terms of ministry success and not virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, kindness and love! My dedication to ministry left me concerned about statistics, results and the number of souls won to Christ,

but I had been missing out on the greatest joy: that of knowing Jesus!

In John 15, we are depicted as branches on the vine, whose sole concern should be clinging to the vine, allowing God's life-giving spirit to flow through us and produce fruit! It is Christ who is building HIS church, not we missionaries! If his Holy Spirit is flowing through us, "we will not be barren or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ!" This knowledge of him (verse 8) comes as the result of acquiring those seven qualities. It is not the prerequisite for seeking after them.

Slowly, the truth of this text began to unfold in my understanding. We must first KNOW GOD (have faith), and in knowing Him, we will diligently seek to add to our faith; virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, kindness and love. This enriches our knowledge of Christ and the cycle is complete!

The next verse was a perfect description of my own situation! "But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins." The cause of my mid-life crisis was short-sightedness. I had lost sight of the ultimate goal in life: "knowing God and my Lord Jesus Christ." Instead of seeking diligently to obtain these seven Christian attributes, I was reverting to the age-old sin of Adam, complaining that God wasn't treating me right. I believed that he was withholding something good.

The words, "these things" in verses 8, 9, 10, 12 and 15 all refer to the same seven qualities of Christian life which we are to strive for.

Many sects and false religious groups make faith a product of works. They claim that one must work hard to gain faith and rewards. Certain sacraments, duties and obligations are necessary for salvation. They speak of different levels of faith, ranging from the faith of lay

persons to the somewhat higher elevation of clergy and climaxing with hierarchical positions of prestige and honor. This aptly describes the Pharisees.

Peter says that we are all equal, “of like precious faith.” Jesus said that he who would be greatest, must become a servant of all. Paul wrote in Romans 3:22, *Even the righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe; for there is no difference.* Ephesians 2:8-9 reads: *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast.* In I Corinthians 4:7 we read, *For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why doest thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?*

I knew that man can’t earn his way to heaven by his good works, yet I was working myself nearly to death, trying to gain God’s recognition, favor and attention. God’s work had become my work and eventually, my work became my god.

When we apply ourselves to the acquisition of these seven “add-ons,” serving the Lord becomes a privilege instead of a duty. The fruit which God produces gives reason for praise and thanksgiving to him instead of being considered a reward for our efforts.

Our final years of ministry in Austria turned out to be fruitful years in many ways. First and foremost, I learned to “add to my faith” virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, kindness and love.

In studying the life and work of Gamaliel, I can not help wondering if Peter might have had Gamaliel in mind when he penned these verses. I am privileged to have the teachings of Jesus and the apostles in printed form. Gamaliel was not blessed in this way, but he had many

opportunities to hear these things from the mouths of Jesus and the apostles!

### ***Fear is NOT a Gift of God!***

There is no reason for us to be enslaved by fear. *For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind* (II Timothy 1:7). God created us for fellowship and to be dependent on him. When we have problems, questions or fears, we can always bring them to our Father in heaven. *Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose* (Romans 8:26-28).

Jesus is right now in heaven interceding for us. If we attempt to do what is pleasing to God, we may still make mistakes, but God will not be harsh with us. He is loving and forgiving.

### ***Fear Not, for I am With Thee!***

A majority of Christians hold blindly to religious traditions that have no rhyme, reason or biblical origin. Not a few of them were adopted from heathen cultures and rituals. One of the reasons people prefer tradition to truth is fear-pressure. By going with the flow, they believe that everything will be all right!

Few Christians fear eternal torment in hell because they have been taught that this dismal prospect was eliminated when they filled out a decision card or raised their hand in a revival meeting. They do good things and

refrain from bad things in order to gain or maintain recognition of their Christian peers and think that this also pleases God. But God desires a personal faith and resulting obedience to him.

Fear pressure is not the only contender for the minds and hearts of men and women who should have a personal faith in God. Self-acclaimed authority is another.

## CHAPTER 12

### AUTHORITY

In 1528, the Hapsburg Emperor Ferdinand was determined to exterminate the “Anabaptists” which were growing rapidly in his territories. The unity and stubborn resistance characteristic of the Anabaptists was greater than that of the Lutherans, who had a well-structured hierarchy and powerful leader. Convinced that a powerful, authoritative and charismatic leader existed among the Anabaptists, Ferdinand called on his subordinates to torture imprisoned Anabaptists by any methods at their disposal in order to glean information about this supposed authority. He believed that if he could find and eliminate the leader, the sect would soon dissipate. Anabaptists repeatedly insisted under torture, that they had no leader other than Jesus Christ and that their only authority was the Bible.

#### ***“We Must Obey God Rather Than Men”***

This statement of the Apostles has echoed down through church history and although Gamaliel and other Jewish leaders did not contest it, neither could they accept the actions and words of the disciples on the basis of this principle. They wanted to know what *human* authority had granted permission to teach and do these things (Matthew 21:23-27). In their minds, there had to be an earthly authority; an official representative of God on earth, who called the shots and handed out permits similar to the ones Saul of Tarsus received from the High Priests.

We can speak of someone “usurping power” but authority can never be usurped. Authority is either had or it is granted by others.

Roberts had no authority to write *Robert’s Rules of Parliamentary Procedure* but he has become *the* authority on this subject. Ever since his book was published, meetings both large and small have been guided by his rules. As is the case with many laws, Robert’s objective was avoiding chaos and maintaining orderly business procedures.

When Christians attending church business meetings are more concerned about adherence to the RR of PP than to the leading of the Holy Spirit, however, they transgress a higher authority: “We must obey God rather than men.” I have never seen a constitutional clause which would allow members present to overrule Roberts by a unanimous vote, but I think it might be a good idea. Roberts is only an authority to the extent in which it is granted him. God must be the ultimate authority in church matters.

### ***Rules, Laws and Regulations***

A democracy has more rules than a dictatorship because no one dares to do anything which might offend a dictator. Rules are helpful in maintaining order, and in certain situations, they can be life-savers.

I don’t know who invented the rule that all motorists should drive on the right side of the road, but it is a pretty good idea. That person probably had no authority to tell us which side of the road to drive on, but the American government, which is our authority, made it a law. A different authority rules England.

Good manners are sometimes dictated by authorities and at other times formed by consensus. When I was a child, my mother would tell me, “Don’t pick your nose!”

If I asked why, she would tell me not to ask, but simply to obey. She could have appealed to a consensus of opinion which believes this to be impolite, but she didn't. I willingly submitted to her authority rather than risk feeling the board of education on my seat of learning. My father had even written a verse of scripture on that board. It was taken from Deuteronomy 8:16 and says, *...that he might humble thee, and that he might prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end.*

Emily Post wrote a book of etiquette rules in 1922, and the world recognizes her as an authority. I follow many of her rules, not because I see Emily as an authority, but because I see no reason to cause offense. There are social taboos, however, which make little sense to me. When a little baby burps, for instance, the mother says, "Good baby!" A year or two later, the kid burps and Mommy says, "Naughty child!" So we learn to swallow burps and risk releasing the gas elsewhere – and that breaks another rule!

Someone published a book telling people how they should move their legs and swing their arms when walking for exercise. If you believe the author of the book to be an authority, you will probably walk funny. Or you may walk funny out of fear pressure. That, of course, is just my own personal assessment of the modern "walking cult." You see, I don't recognize a convincing authority behind the book and prefer to walk naturally.

Most men refrain from showing emotion in public because it is considered effeminate. So they choke back their tears, get ulcers and become victimized by tears of the opposite sex. To my knowledge no one has ever made that a rule, so I credit it to fear pressure, perhaps self-inflicted.

Getting serious again, I see a fine line of distinction between observing rules and consideration of others. We

do well to avoid extremism and, at the same time, not to simply go with the flow. It is better to be a traditionalist than to break accepted rules for no good reason.

### ***Legalism, Bureaucracy and Red Tape***

“Make love, not war” was not an invention of the California flower power movement of the sixties. Under the Latin motto, *Alii belli gerunt, tu felix Austria nube!* (literally: “Let others wage wars; Austria happily marries!”) members of the happy Hapsburg dynasty courted and married their way to power and wealth until the Austrian nation became known as “the Empire on which the sun never set.” Two and a half centuries ago, half of Europe belonged to Austria and it was no easy task, exacting high taxes from fifty million people and at the same time, keeping them from open rebellion.

Most great empires of the past had to contend with rebellious uprisings of dissatisfied subjects and Austria was no exception. Unlike other nations which crushed uprisings with military force, the Hapsburg rulers developed a unique and bloodless manner of maintaining absolute control. We call it bureaucracy or “red tape,” and this invention has become an effective tool for keeping subjects humble, even in western democratic nations like the United States of America.

Anyone with a grievance or complaint was invited to share whatever was on his heart with an official representative of the Emperor. He or she would be greeted with a friendly smile, and no request was refused! The public official simply gave the person endless forms to fill out. In those days, most complainants could not read or write, so they would be obliged to pay for the services of another public official who could. Citizens stubborn and patient enough to complete all the forms would be referred to the next highest office, where the process was repeated.

The most persistent complainants were offered jobs as public officials!

Today, one in five Austrians works for the government and bureaucracy has gotten quite out of hand, as any Austrian would readily testify. A lady who lost her purse in Vienna reported the loss in the next police station. After describing the purse in detail, an officer reached into a bin and pulled out a purse which matched her description. Delighted, the lady declared that this was definitely her lost purse. She was then asked to make a complete list of the contents of her handbag. She complied to the best of her ability but forgot one or two items. The police refused to give her those items even though she recognized them on sight. She was then required to fill out a robbery report for fingernail clippers which she had listed that were not in her purse after all!

### ***Secular Authority in New Testament Times***

Secular authority in Israel during the time of Christ was constantly changing. The Romans were in ultimate control, of course, and Emperors placed pawns in key positions of power, depending on their loyalties and ability to maintain a steady cash flow for operating expenses and lavish tastes.

When political changes took place in Rome (most Emperors were assassinated by their closest friends), key political players were also exchanged in the provinces. In many cases, provincial rulers attempted to display a shift of loyalty in order to maintain their positions of power.

The Romans tended to leave power figures in place as long as they were willing to cooperate. In most cases, these were wealthy land owners or influential members of royal families.

## ***The First Church State?***

Historically, religious and military influences have always been the primary forces in asserting and maintaining political power. Greece and early Rome sought to consolidate these forces through the deification of Emperors. It became necessary for religious leaders to cooperate to some extent with political rulers in order to preserve a semblance of authority in spiritual matters. Most secular rulers conceded limited authority to religious leaders rather than risk an insurrection. Herod the Great, Pilate and others sought to please or at least appease the Jews.

This arrangement led to the formation of a quasi “state church” in Israel. Sadducees and Pharisees found it necessary to cut deals with the Romans in order to maintain spiritual control of the Jews. Any and all religious activity beyond the perimeters of mutual agreement were viewed with great nervousness by both secular and Jewish leaders. Neither side wanted to risk upsetting this convenient and delicate coalition of power and authority.

Christians, however, claimed to have only one kurios, Jesus Christ. Even though they were law-abiding, peace-loving citizens, their recognition of a higher authority was viewed as open rebellion against both the political and religious leadership of Israel.

## ***Role Model for the Papal State***

A similar system of power-sharing was later practiced by rulers of the Holy Roman Empire and the Christian Church. After Constantine embraced the Christian faith, church leaders achieved a new level of power and affluence which was frequently abused. The situation in Rome got so bad that Constantine decided to move the capitol of the Roman Empire to Constantinople

(Istanbul). It was not Constantine, but his follower Theodosius (279-395), who made Christianity the official religion of the empire. He misused the popularity of the Christians to solidify his holdings, requiring all subjects to be baptized into the church. As was the case with the Jews of Jesus' day, a "state church" was formed. Theodosius proclaimed that heresy was a crime against the empire and the propagation of heresy was punishable by death.

Pope Gregory the Great (590) laid the foundations for a papal state (as opposed to the church state). Christianity continued expanding in Europe and Asia but few of its adherents were happy with the Holy Roman Empire. The "blessed hope of the Lord's return" had lost much of its luster with the passing of time and the Kingdom of God had come to represent an oppressive dictatorship.

As the Holy Roman Empire steadily gained power, the Bible gradually lost its significance in political decisionmaking. Powerful church leaders and secular monarchs fought over territorial rights. Bishops vied with one another over who could erect the most magnificent cathedral. Laws were mainly designed to keep the peasants in subjection and to secure a steady income for the rulers. Money was needed to support lavish life-styles and to finance wars.

Although there were many disputes and shifts of power between secular and church leaders, the basic alliance remained intact for six centuries. The clergy served the secular nobility in reminding peasants of their "God-given duties" while the secular Lords reinforced the church's authority. Laws of the state became religion and submission to the church was enforced by the state. Those who sought to obey God rather than men were confined to dungeons and torture chambers. Thousands of Waldensians, Anabaptists and other Christians were beheaded, drowned and burned at the stake.

## *Ideal Conditions for the Birth of Islam*

Mohammed was born in 570 and began promoting his views soon after Pope Gregory created the Papal state. He was a good observer and student of history who recognized the great power potential that a coalition of church and state offered. But Mohammed also recognized the shortcomings of such an arrangement. What the Christian Church and Roman Empire could do in coalition, he could do better as a singular unified religious kingdom!

Islam offered an interesting alternative to Judaism and Christianity. Its theology was not difficult for many to accept. Mohammed gave credence to both Abraham and Jesus, considering them to be legitimate prophets. Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam believed in only one God. Some teachings of Jesus and passages of the Torah (Old Testament) were included in the Koran, so both the Old and New Testaments seemed unnecessary. The Roman Church had withheld scriptures from the common people and those few who could read Latin and afford the expensive manuscripts were not interested. The Koran, on the other hand, was written in Arabic, and at least the Arab populations had access to its teachings. Most significantly, Islam, like Judaism and Roman Catholicism, was a religion of legalistic works and rituals. There was no room for those who would obey God rather than men.

Islam was promoted simultaneously as both a government and religion, but its advances were primarily of a military nature. *Jihad* means to convert or destroy the enemy, but because those who voluntarily converted to Islam were released from taxation and church dues, many converted willingly. Bounty seized from those who resisted sufficed to finance much of Islam's "first great jihad."

Islam grew like wild fire, expanding from the Arabian Peninsula in every direction. No religion in history grew faster than Islam during the first two centuries of its existence.

By the time Mohammad died in 632 AD, the Western Roman Empire was a shambles, and the Eastern Empire in Constantinople was trying futilely to maintain some semblance of its early grandeur.

Charles Martel of France, the father of Charlemagne, was able to temporarily stop Muslim advances at the battle of Tours in 732, but Muslims continued their campaign to conquer the West until they were finally driven out of Spain at the battle of Granada in 1492, the year in which Columbus discovered America.

The second major thrust of Islam was directed towards the East and South. The Ottoman Turks came to power in 1450 and brought down the Christian stronghold of Constantinople on May 29, 1453.

Although Islam had fractured into warring sects and bitter rivalries, the Byzantine Empire continued to grow under the Ottomans. In the last two decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century however, the Ottomans suffered a series of defeats on both land and sea. Turning westward again, they experienced their greatest humiliation in an attempt to capture Vienna in 1683. It was some time before further attempts were made by the Turks to expand their territory.

## ***Reformation Europe***

By 1600, a large part of Europe had become protestant; many of the nobility had defected from the Roman Church, and most peasants were following Lutheran or Anabaptist teachings. Printed New Testaments and Bibles in the language of the people were spreading rapidly throughout Europe. Repeated decrees of the Emperor demanding that subjects return to the

Catholic fold fell on deaf ears. The reformation movement continued to pick up momentum well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The protestant reformation took a heavy toll on the Emperor's cash flow and military resources. On several occasions, the Emperor found it necessary to make concessions to protestant lords, in order to get money and soldiers to fight the Muslim Turks.

In the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Islam was dominant primarily in Arabic lands. The Muslims were divided into cantankerous, Emir dominated sheikhdoms and roving tribes of nomads. Anti-western sentiment grew among Muslims, who were not willing to accept blame for their failures. This situation set the stage for an Islamic revival known as Wahhabism, the breeding ground for radical terrorist groups.

Wahhabism was born before World War I in Saudi Arabia and called for the rejection of anything that was not based on the original writings of the Prophet Mohammed. It demands strict adherence to the commands of the Koran, which calls for a holy jihad similar to those which had brought great territorial gains for Islam in the past. We can recognize the forcefulness and effectiveness of this Muslim military sect in activities and practices of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. The latter is now widely recognized as leader of the "third great Jihad," but Sadaam Hussein also strove for this highly prized recognition until his political demise and captivity. He believed that he was ordained by Allah to complete the unfinished task which the ancient Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar set out to accomplish.

### ***Religious Authority in New Testament Times***

Let us return our attention to the situation among Jewish leaders in Israel at the time of Christ and the apostles.

## *The Sanhedrin*

The Sanhedrin had final authority in all Jewish religious affairs. There were minor courts of Sanhedrin in many towns of Israel, but the Great Sanhedrin of Jerusalem could be compared to the US Supreme Court. The Sanhedrin was made up of representatives of different religious parties, the Pharisees and Sadducees being most influential. High Priests, both active and inactive, also played an important role in decisions of the Sanhedrin for it was apparently the High Priest who called meetings of this body. The High Priest was usually a member of the Sadducees in apostolic times, and this was felt in decisions of the Sanhedrin even though the Pharisees generally held a majority. Anyone who taught against or resisted decisions handed down by the Sanhedrin was considered in violation of the Torah (based on Deuteronomy 17:8-13).

In Old Testament times, the office of High Priest was mostly hereditary, but Herod the Great deposed and replaced High Priests at will. After executing the Hasmonaean High Priest Aristobulus III, he appointed no less than seven High Priests in 33 years. Nearly all were from outside Palestine (generally Alexandria and Babylon) to ascertain that they would not present a political threat. This development gave even greater significance to the Sanhedrin.

In matters of faith and practice, the Sanhedrin could generally find consensus by referring to the authority of the Torah, which was accepted by all Jewish parties. Many decisions were governed by the *Thirteen Principles* articulated by Maimonides or summations in the *Shulchan Aruch*. Although some factions differed on interpretation and application, it was usually possible to make rulings that all parties could accept.

A *nasi* or president was chosen to lead discussions and pronounce decisions of the Sanhedrin. It is not clear to me how the *nasi* was selected and how long he held this position, but the position was a powerful one and frequently inherited. The *nasi* was highly esteemed, respected and honored. Hillel and a dynasty of five consecutive descendants held this important position, including Gamaliel.

### ***The Pharisees***

Jesus said of the Pharisees, *For they bind heavy burdens grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers* (Matthew 23:4). The Pharisees considered themselves to be righteous in God's sight and above reproach, yet they were guilty of arrogance and self-righteousness.

In all fairness, I must state here that the legalism of the Pharisees was the end result of more noble aims. In their struggle to meet Jehovah God's approval, they strove for perfection, which led to the creation of many legalistic rules. These placed a heavy burden of expectations on the people, but their leaders exempted themselves through the creation of other rulings.

The Pharisees were divided into two major schools of thought. Understanding the philosophies of these schools can shed light on many New Testament texts, including statements of Jesus himself. Such awareness will help us to better understand tensions among the Jews.

Shemaiah and Abtalion were the honored and respected teachers and interpreters of Jewish law between 50 and 30 BC. Two of their most gifted students were Hillel and Shammai (not to be confused with Shamaiah). As these two Rabbis gained influence in Israel, their positions on many matters collided. As a result of this

disparity of opinions, two schools of Jewish thought developed, each one named after its founding sage.

## ***The School of Hillel***

Following the death of Shemaiah and Abtalion, a question concerning a sacrificial ritual arose which no one seemed able to respond to adequately. Hillel addressed the council and presented his arguments in a manner which showed at once his superiority over the *bene bathyra*, who led the school of scribes. The Babylonian Talmud describes this issue as follows:

### *Hillel Resolves Passover Halakah*

*Once, when the 14th (of Nisan) fell on a Sabbath, the benei Bathyra were uncertain and did not know whether or not Passover suspended the Sabbath (regulations). They said: "Is there any man who knows whether or not Passover suspends the Sabbath?"*

*They were told: "There is a man come from Babylon whose name is Hillel ha Babli. He attended Shemaiah and Abtalion, the two greats of the period and should know whether or not Passover suspends the Sabbath."*

*They sent and called him, saying to him: "Do you know anything about Passover suspending the Sabbath or not?" He told them: "Now is Passover the one time in the year when the Sabbath is suspended? Indeed, there are many more than 200 "passovers" in a year which suspend the Sabbath."*

*They said to him: "From where do you (get this)?" He said to them: "In regard to Passover it is said: 'its appointed time' (Num 9.2) and in regard to the daily offering it is said: 'its appointed time' (Num 28:10). If 'its appointed time' said in regard to the daily offering suspends the Sabbath, so 'its appointed time' said in regard to Passover suspends the Sabbath. Moreover, comparing the light to the heavy: if the daily offering suspends the Sabbath, although (to omit) it is not punished by excommunication, is not the decision to be that the Passover — (to omit) which is punished by excommunication — suspends the Sabbath?"*

*Immediately they set him at the head and appointed him "prince" [nasi] over them. And all that day he spent explaining everything in the paschal regulations [halakoth]. He began by rebuking them, saying: "What did you do that caused me to come up*

*from Babylon to be prince over you? You were lazy! It proves you did not attend Shemaiah and Abtalion.”*

(Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 66)

From this time on, Hillel was recognized as an undisputed authority among the Pharisees and scribes of Jerusalem. Hillel's more liberal interpretations of law became increasingly popular among the scribes and Pharisees and even more so with the general populace.

Hillel accepted the *Halakah* (accepted or recognized Jewish law handed down from earliest times), but in opposition to his colleague, Shammai, he generally advocated milder and more liberal interpretations. His love of peace and his proverbial meekness and mildness became well known throughout Israel as the following statement shows: “Let a man be always humble and patient like Hillel, and not passionate like Shammai” (Shab. 31). Hillel is quoted as saying, “My humility is my exaltation; my exaltation is my humility” (Lev. R. i. 1 with reference to Psalm 113:5).

Hillel's gentleness and patience are illustrated in an anecdote in the *Talmud*, which tells of two men who wagered 400 denarius (one denarius represented a day's wages) that Hillel could be driven to anger. Although they questioned him and made insulting allusions to his Babylonian origin, they were unsuccessful in their attempt. His wife once gave an entire meal which she had prepared for an honored guest to a poor man and then prepared another. When she excused herself for the delay and explained its cause, Hillel praised her for her action.

Gamaliel's advocacy for restraint in executing the apostles (Acts 5) would have been typical of the Hillite tradition, but the consequent beating of the apostles before their release would also have been permitted by Hillel's school as a conciliatory gesture to opposing forces in the Sanhedrin.

It has been claimed that “on the seven rules of Hillel rest the thirteen rules of Rabbi Ishmael.” Hillel was epoch-making for his systematic exposition of ancient Scripture.

It is interesting to note that Hillel, like Jesus, at first criticized the hypocritical and luxurious lifestyles of many of his colleagues. In later years however, he too amassed a sizable fortune. His grandson Gamaliel owned a palatial home in Jerusalem and much land in Judea.

### ***The School of Shammai***

Shammai’s fundamentalist interpretations of the law also commanded a large following in Israel and intense competition developed between the two schools.

Shammaite Pharisees mixed easier with Sadducean Zealots than with fellow Pharisees of the school of Hillel. Some expositors believe that the “woes” of Matthew 23 were aimed primarily at the Shammaite Pharisees, but many fit Hillite traditions equally well.

Personal feelings and fleshly desires were often suppressed by the Shammaite school, while the Hillite Pharisees were not so disposed to deny themselves certain luxuries and comforts of life.

These schools and their opposing views played a major role in the rebellion against Rome in 67-70 A.D..

### ***Written and Oral Authorities***

It is here appropriate to explain the authority base of Jewish religion in the first century. I will attempt to make this explanation simple because I realize that many readers could become confused with unfamiliar terminology.

**TORAH:** Both schools (Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai) accepted the five books of Moses, known as the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy).

**MIGRA:** This means “written” and is the Rabbinic designation for scriptures of the Old Testament. These would include writings of the major and minor prophets, chronicles and poetic books.

**ORAL LAW:** Many practical issues of everyday life could not be settled by the ten commandments and written law (*Torah*), so Moses instituted a court of judges to rule on such matters (Deuteronomy 17:8-13). The determinations of this council were announced by Moses and considered by the people to be oracles of God. These pronouncements were handed down from generation to generation for 17 centuries. Prior to 200 AD, Jewish law except for the *Torah* was exclusively transmitted orally. It was even forbidden to write oral law, also known as the *Oral Torah*. The court of judges instituted by Moses later became known as the Sanhedrin.

Many considered *Oral Law* to be more important than the *Torah* and *Migra*, for it was maintained that God spoke in more explicit detail to men like Adam, Noah, Moses and Samuel. This belief was criticized by both Jesus and the apostle Paul, who claimed that the traditions of the Jews contradicted God’s Word (Matthew 15:6; Mark 7:12; Romans 4:14).

Gamaliel was recognized as the leading scholar and teacher of his time. He was very familiar with both the scriptures and the oral traditions. Unfortunately, Gamaliel also esteemed the latter to be equal to or even more important than the written Word, for much of what Gamaliel believed to be truth was simply traditions of men.

**MISHNA:** After much debate, the restriction for writing *Oral Law* was lifted around 200 AD. It became

apparent that this was the only way to preserve the law following the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Rabbi Yehudah ha Nasi, which means “Judah the Prince” is credited with developing the *Mishna*, but the study of Jewish law continued to be conducted in memorized form even after it was published.

The orders of the *Mishna* are 1) *Zeraim* (Seeds), which has to do with agriculture; 2) *Mo’ed* (Festival Days), which pertains to the Sabbath and Festivals; 3) *Nashim* (Women), which deals with marriage and divorce; 4) *Neziqin* (Damages), having to do with civil and criminal law; 5) *Qodashim* (Holy Things), involving sacrificial rites, the Temple and dietary laws; and finally, 6) *Toharot* (Purity), which pertains to rituals and the laws of purity.

A number of Jewish sages are quoted in the *Mishna*, including Gamaliel, but this work did not exist during his lifetime.

**TALMUD:** The *Talmud*, of which there were Babylonian and Jerusalem versions, serves as an exposition of the *Mishna*. All chapters in the *Talmud* must therefore begin with a *Mishnah* citation.

**COMMENTARIES:** Books of homilies known as *Midrash* also appeared soon after development of the *Mishna*. The two major commentaries of the Babylonian Talmud are those of *Rashi* and the *Tosefta*. The *Mishnah*, *Talmud* and *Tosefta* are works of primary interest and authority when researching Jewish law and tradition in the first century.

Around 20 years before the birth of Jesus, adherents of Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai began disputing matters of Oral Law. Until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., these schools clashed over 350 times on various interpretations. Some of their differences were taken very seriously, and it is reported that Zealots associated with

Shammai massacred numerous opponents of the Hillel school.

The bitter disagreements between the Shammai and Hillel schools played a major role in events leading up to the rebellion against Rome and ensuing destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. They also appear to have influenced Saul of Tarsus.

Both Hillel and Shammai died when Jesus was still a teenager, but their schools were influential during his entire lifetime.

### ***Hierarchy and Laity***

In the Austrian Bible Institute, we required every student to do several hours of practical work each week. Because one young man had learned the plumbing trade, I once asked him to clean a stopped up toilet. He responded by saying that if he wanted to do that kind of work, he wouldn't have come to the Bible Institute. I said nothing but gave him another job to do. Later he discovered that I did the messy job myself and apologized. Unfortunately, his attitude didn't change. After two semesters, he left the school and we never heard from him again.

Many educated individuals seem to view academic prowess as being superior to manual labor. The common working man exerts more physical energy and gets dirty, while white collar workers generally receive a higher salary. Many theologians also tend to think along these lines, but it is the common working man and not the clergy who leads most people to Christ.

The scribes and Pharisees looked down on the common people, but Jesus sought their company and treated them as equals. Jesus placed great importance on the study of scriptures, but his well-known stories and parables display an incredible understanding and love for those who humbly sought to serve God with whatever

knowledge and ability they had. The “Widow’s Mite,” “The Good Samaritan,” “The Parable of the Talents,” “The Rich Man and Lazarus” are just a few of the stories which illustrate this.

Some use Luke 10:38-42 to show that Jesus elevated pious knowledge over humble service. Martha was busy preparing a delicious meal for Jesus and inwardly fuming that her sister wasn’t helping. After a while, she complained to Jesus, who unexpectedly rebuked Martha and praised Mary. If Mary had been the one who complained that her sister was too busy to listen to what the Lord had to say, I can perceive of Jesus rebuking her and coming to Martha’s defense. The lesson Jesus taught was that listening must have precedence over doing, but in no way did he belittle sacrificial service. Martha was probably envious of her sister and would gladly have sat at Jesus’ feet to hear what he had to say.

### ***Jesus and the Pharisees***

Around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European theologians began investigating parallels in the teachings of Hillel and Jesus. In his book, *The Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth* (Cologne: E.J. Brill, 1964), Asher Finkel argued that Jesus followed Pharisaical teachings and adopted their stand on controversial issues (Matthew 5:18-19, Luke 16:17), accepting the oral tradition of the academies, observing the proper mealtime procedures (Mark 6:56, Matthew 14:36), Sabbath laws and priestly regulations (Matthew 8:4, Mark 1:44, Luke 5:4).

I would prefer to say that Jesus did little to agitate unnecessarily on matters which had become commonplace, provided they did not stand in direct opposition to scriptures or proper behavior.

In spite of undeniable similarities, there are major differences between the teachings of Jesus and those of

leading Pharisees. His teaching on divorce (see Chapter 16) and dealings with the Samaritan woman show drastic differences in his attitude toward women.

Although Jesus was in general agreement with some or even many Pharisaical traditions, this would not indicate that he “followed” their teachings. Even a superfluous study of the life of Christ shows that he followed no human teaching or person but was exactly that which he claimed to be; “the way, the truth and the life.”

It is where these schools differed that Jesus sometimes appears to take sides. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971) remarks: “In general, Jesus’ polemical sayings against the Pharisees were far meeker than the Essene attacks and not sharper than similar utterances in the talmudic sources.” The “Sermon on the Mount” (see Chapter 20) is unique in character and shows a stark demarcation from the teachings of both schools. In his reference to adultery, Jesus was more severe than Shammai, but his admonishment to turn the other cheek shows a more liberal stance than that espoused by Hillel.

## CHAPTER 13

### UNITY AND DIVISION

When people of all denominations and religious persuasions talk about the weather, cars, food or computers, there is little disagreement, and only preferences tend to divide. Some like sweetened coffee while others like it black or prefer tea. With sports and politics, it gets a little heavy at times, but nothing is taken quite so seriously as religion.

In religion, unity is rare and disagreement abounds. Disagreement not only thrives between members of different faiths, but also between individuals belonging to the same denomination or church. Muslims are a quarrelsome bunch, but Christians are not far behind them. There are innumerable divisions and subdivisions, including a hundred brands of Baptists. In my wife's home town, three Methodist Churches are within a stone's throw of each other. One of them is named "Stone Methodist," and it is possible that a few stones have actually been thrown! Perhaps someone can explain to me why every town has a "First National Bank" and several "First" churches, but no First National Church.

Of course no true Christian would separate from fellow believers over trivialities. Reasons deemed important enough to divide over only appear trivial to outsiders. The Amish are seen by most as a homogenous group. They all do without electricity and drive horse-drawn buggies but they are divided over the permissible color of their buggies (black or gray), and as to whether buttons should be allowed on clothing. Water and wind

power are accepted by all the Amish, but the use of solar energy is a divisive issue.

Just as we all agree on what constitutes a healthy physical body, nearly all can achieve a good degree of unanimity in what would describe good and evil people. Good people work hard, care for others, are honest and live disciplined lives. Bad people lie, cheat, steal, kill and have bad manners. No argument!

## ***Unity***

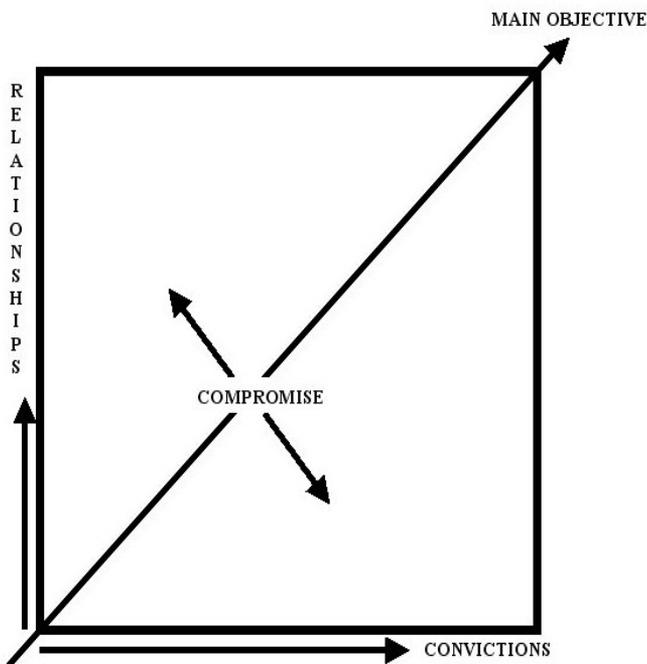
Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father for unity among his followers (John 17:21-23) and Christians generally agree that unity is important. But unity becomes increasingly difficult to attain as imperfections surface among members of the fellowship. Classifying sins and sinners into minor and major categories is often the only way in which some semblance of unity can be obtained. The same is true for doctrinal differences. In order to achieve a greater degree of unity, many groups pay less attention to doctrine and concentrate on their name, history or certain traditions and liturgical rites.

When Christians divide and form new groups, they usually speak of “defending the faith” and there are plenty of “friendly fire” casualties.

## ***Love that Divides***

Ironically, the primary force that divides Christians is that which should unite — love. Some Christians separate out of a love for truth while others separate out of love for one another. We all live in conflict between relationships and convictions, and there is no escaping this unless we have neither relationships nor convictions.

I have given seminars on conflict management, and one of the graphics I use (figure 1) shows how these driving forces can divide people who belong together.



Before I explain this graphic, I feel obliged to make a disclaimer. Every binding contract, software license agreement and medicine box includes disclaimer information in fine print. We get several credit card offers each week and 0% APR is printed boldly on each one, often on the envelope. The fine print disclaimer usually nullifies the bold print. My disclaimer is right up front in normal print. I want to be certain that you read it!

### ***Disclaimer***

By using the word “convictions,” I do not mean preferences. The following example may illustrate the difference.

Before my wife and I met, I worked on cars while she spent her free time with horses. After marriage we learned to compromise in order to strengthen our relationship. We occasionally attend car shows and horse events together, and we allow each other freedom to devote time to our particular interests. In addition, we have developed a common love for hiking in the Austrian Alps and strolling on the boardwalk of Ocean City, NJ. Some things that were once important to us have been compromised, but what we gained in the process is of greater value. All this has to do with preferences, not convictions about what is right, true and necessary.

The first argument in most marriages takes place in the bathroom, and ours was no exception. The toilet is a common source of dissention (leaving the lid up; not flushing or brushing properly; wasting paper etc.), but we had no problems there. Other arguments center around the tub or shower (soap, shampoo, use of water, wet floors etc.), but here too, no contest! The toothpaste is another cause of strife in a marriage, and this is where we collided. We both replace the cap after use and soon agreed on what brand of toothpaste to buy, but we differed on which end of the tube to squeeze. After four decades of marriage, I still squeeze the far end of the tube while my wife squeezes near the neck. When it comes to deep-seated convictions, we don't budge!

1. When I speak favorably about compromising, I am not referring to the compromise of absolute truth. Truth is very important and it should never be compromised. Any and every compromise of truth is wrong.

Even Pontius Pilate was sensitive to this fact, which is why he asked, “What is truth?” He even asked the right person, Jesus. He should also have listened to his wife. After a bad dream, she warned Pilate to have nothing to do with the crucifixion of Jesus. Her warning fell on deaf ears (Matthew 27:19).

Having made this point, let me say that what we hold to be true may indeed be compromised.

Yes, you read it right! We may compromise our conviction of truth. Unfortunately, most people see no difference between THE truth and that which they PERCEIVE to be true. Herein lies the main cause of human conflict and the greatest hindrance in conflict resolution. I’m not much of a poet, but it’s the thought that counts:

Everyone thinks he or she is right,  
And that’s why we sometimes argue and fight.  
We readily agree that one side is wrong,  
But that it is you, I knew all along.

Having made these two important points, let’s get to the graphic and the meaning of the four aspects mentioned.

### ***1) Relationships***

No man is an island, and hopefully all of us have relationships with people whom we care about and whose opinions we respect. We may even make great personal sacrifices to preserve or strengthen such relationships.

### ***2) Convictions***

We have fixed ideas about what is right and wrong, called our beliefs, “values system” or personal convictions. If a person believes that Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> is an unlucky day, he or she will avoid doing anything

important on that day. If a woman believes that everyone notices her appearance, she will spend much time in front of the mirror before going public. A man never reads instructions because he believes he is clever enough to figure it out.

These examples may seem trivial, but look out for devout Muslims who believe killing infidels will get them a free ticket to paradise. You are reading this book about a famous Jew written by an American Christian, so he will assume that you too are an infidel.

### ***3) Compromise***

Because some people seek to “water down the truth for the sake of unity,” the word “compromise” has gotten a bad rap among many Christians. But compromise is not inherently wrong, and it can even prove to be quite helpful in resolving conflict.

No matter how much importance we place on relationships and our convictions, all of us - without exception - make compromises in both areas. Sometimes we recognize the need to compromise our convictions for the sake of relationships and in other situations we must remain true to our convictions at the expense of relationships. That is why a main objective is important.

### ***4) Objective***

The fourth factor involved in conflict management (shown in the graphic as a diagonal arrow) represents our basic objective, purpose or aim. How we relate to others and the value we place on our convictions are determined by our main purpose or objective.

### ***Importance of the Objective***

We all have convictions about what is right and wrong and we also have relationships or friendships. If we

attempt to concentrate on preserving relationships and holding to our convictions without a main objective to guide us, we are in for a rough ride. It is perhaps possible if all parties agree 100% in their convictions, but this condition is extremely rare! Normally, either personal relationships or convictions will have to be compromised to some extent in order to achieve the main objective. Without the objective, we bounce to and fro between convictions and relationships like a ping-pong-ball in the Olympic Games. There are people who go through life with little or no purpose, but most have some kind of an objective, even if it is a subconscious one.

Secularists generally have a self-serving objective. It may be attaining wealth, power, influence, comfort, friendships, seeking adventure or even conflict (I know people who delight in a good fight)! Complicating the matter even more is the fact that secularists seldom have a singular purpose. Having multiple objectives or constantly changing ones causes much frustration and stress.

In order to understand this concept, let's assume that you work for a firm that sells heavy equipment. An important customer is considering the purchase of 50 earth-moving machines per year over a five-year period. You and a fellow employee have been entrusted with the negotiations, which if successful, will enable the firm to realize a handsome profit and guarantee a nice bonus for yourselves. The customer, however, has received enticing offers from competitors and the prospect of negotiating a deal looks bleak. Your colleague suggests offering the purchasing agent an undercover sum of money if he closes the deal in favor of your company. You now have several options:

- a) You can agree that your colleague's idea is great, and offer the bribe. There is no need for compromise in any way. Because you both believe

- that the ends justify the means and your objective is getting money, relationships are not endangered.
- b) You may reject his suggestion, either because of your convictions or your main objective. In this case, you may offer a compromise or suggest another option.
  - c) If you can't agree, either separation or a compromise is inevitable. You may compromise your convictions about what is right and go along with the deal rather than endanger your relationship with a colleague. Or you insist on doing it your way and compromise the relationship.
  - d) There are different ways of dealing with conflicts between members of an organization.
    - Sometimes, the boss, manager or owner takes care of the matter.
    - In larger firms, dispute settlement may be referred to a panel or labor union.
    - Many businesses and institutions now have purpose statements. If the company you work for includes an ethics clause in its purpose statement, this would influence your action.
    - If you are a Christian, you should have a godly purpose that overrules any human purpose statement. Even if your employer insists that you do something unethical, we ought to obey God rather than man.

### ***Selfish Objectives***

A price must be paid in attaining any goal, but selfish objectives require many sacrifices in both relationships and convictions. Committing adultery may temporarily fulfill a selfish objective, but it can also ruin a good

marriage. Inheritance battles have destroyed many excellent family relationships. Cheating on taxes causes offenders sleepless nights, worrying about getting caught. Seeking to attain selfish objectives always results in deficits. Instead of enjoying the attainment of their objectives, selfish people become victims of their own desires. The compromises they make in both relationships and convictions leaves them feeling guilty and cheap.

### ***Noble Objectives***

A soldier may risk his life on the battlefield in order to gain or preserve our collective freedoms. He acts in behalf of both relationships (fellow citizens) and in the cause for truth. This is a noble objective, but there is a price to pay.

The soldier makes compromises in order to serve in the military. He believes, for example, that taking another person's life is basically wrong, yet he compromises this principle for a higher ideal when he joins the military. He may love his spouse and children, yet because of his noble objective, he is prepared to leave loved ones for a long period of time, perhaps never to return.

Even if the soldier loses his life and the battle is lost, he will be remembered and honored as a hero by those he loved and served.

Although we appreciate such individuals and their ultimate sacrifice for the nation, it is not enough to have a noble, selfless objective. We really need to adopt God's purpose for our lives.

### ***A Godly Objective***

Concentrating on good relationships while attempting to abide by our convictions is noble and good, but that is not enough. No matter how hard we try, we will never have inner peace unless we seek to keep fellowship with

God and remain in the center of his will for us. In other words, we need to have a godly objective.

Young lovers can be drawn into the devil's trap by seeking to please each other without respecting God's will in their relationship.

The same is true when we attempt to obey "the truth" without a proper relationship with Christ. You may know someone who caused much heartache in a church or Christian organization by acting on what he or she "knew was right."

A good Christian leader is not one who gets others to agree with him or to follow him, but one who motivates people to seek fellowship with God and to obey him. In doing so, personal relationships and convictions of truth (right and wrong) begin to reflect and be influenced by this relationship with God.

Maintaining an intimate relationship with God must be our primary objective and this will have immediate positive results on both our convictions and our relationships. Instead of insisting on having our way, we rely on God's Word and the leading of the Holy Spirit to maintain good fellowship with others.

When we recognize God's omnipotence, we admit our own human fallibility. Because our objective is to please God and keep fellowship with him, what we believe to be true (our convictions) is subject to the Holy Spirit's scrutiny and correction. When there are differences with others, especially fellow believers, we recognize the possibility of their being right and our being wrong. As we pray and seek God's will in each matter, the Holy Spirit will lead us. Generally, we will attempt to make as few compromises as possible in both relationships and convictions, and those we do feel obliged to make will not come easy. Sometimes we believe the Spirit is leading us to compromise

relationships for the sake of what we hold to be more important. At other times, we feel compelled to concede what we think is the right course of action for the sake of fellowship and unity. In either case, we can sleep well, knowing that we sought to do what was right in God's sight. God and our fellow believers will forgive us if we were wrong. And if we were right, we will just thank God and give him the praise.

### ***God's Objective for the Church***

Jesus clearly stated his three-fold objective for the church. His church is to 1) preach the Word; 2) gather and baptize those who believe; and 3) teach all things which he taught us, also called "making disciples."

Christians have individual personalities, come from different backgrounds, have varying degrees of education and experience, and each of us has a unique DNA. If our focus is attaining God's purpose in our lives, all these problems can be overcome. We can be united in purpose, though divided in some of our convictions and relationships. And as long as there is unity of purpose, there is hope for improved relationships and agreement in the fundamentals.

When the Lord founded his church at Pentecost, he sent the Holy Spirit who helped people of different languages and cultures understand each other. The Holy Spirit still helps us to understand God's Word and each other today. He enables us, empowers us and works in and through us. The human element is still very much present and causes a lot of friction, but God's Spirit helps us to resolve and overcome differences.

Difficulties arise when we are not living in close fellowship with God or when we have distanced ourselves from the rest of the body of Christ (other Christians). If we seek to live according to God's will, we may still make

mistakes, but they will definitely be fewer and less damaging.

### ***When Christians Fail***

I was recently taking visitors from Austria to Kennedy International Airport and had to cross the Verazzano Narrows bridge. Halfway across the bridge, a sign informed motorists who wanted to get on the Belt Parkway to use the left lane. I turned on my signal light and looked for an opening, but the lane was already filled bumper to bumper with commuters who knew this route by heart; and that was all their hearts knew. I slowed to a crawl, hoping for a break but there was none. Motorists behind me were honking their horns angrily. I finally saw a gap and changed lanes, but in my rear-view mirror, I saw a police car with flashing lights. The officer motioned me to pull over into a special parking area filled with cars of other offenders who, like myself, had unknowingly crossed a double line.

I winced and paid the fine, but it never occurred to me that I should ask God to forgive me. Crossing a double line didn't seem like such a big matter, and besides, it was an obvious trap to extract money from out-of-state motorists! When I shared this experience with a group of Christian friends, they all sympathized with me and none chided me for doing something wrong.

After some reflection, however, I realized that although the traffic violation was perhaps unavoidable, I had committed another inexcusable sin. I not only broke man's law, but I allowed God's purpose to be displaced by a selfish objective. All I really cared about was getting to the airport and back home as soon as possible without getting hit by an uninsured motorist ( New Jersey has a million of them!).

I must confess that I knowingly broke many laws in attempting to meet my selfish objective. I had been speeding and following too closely. At least once, I changed lanes without using my signal lights. And it didn't bother my conscience in the least because everyone else was doing the same or worse! I also had evil thoughts about those drivers who refused to let me in and the policeman who stopped me. I even shared these feelings with the people I was taking to the airport – who were not Christians! Where was remorse, confession and repentance? Where were my religious convictions about obeying the truth? And what value had I placed on relationships?

Do you see how important it is to maintain a godly objective in all situations? It is next to impossible to drive a car any distance without violating at least one traffic regulation, but even if the episode on the bridge could not have been avoided, my reaction would have been different had my objective been to please God. If I had reacted properly, God could have used that incident to show others how Christians serve God rather than basic instincts. I blew it and I knew it!

### ***God is Good!***

Laws are rigid and unbending, but God is gracious, loving and caring. Although the opportunity to be a testimony of God's greatness was wasted, I confessed and my relationship with God was restored. I hope I learned from the experience.

A pastor acquaintance of mine once visited a sick woman on the way home from a shopping trip. His two small children were along and played in the yard while the pastor and his wife visited. After a while, the three-year-old son came in with a handful of pretty flowers “for the sick lady.” She was of course delighted, but the parents

looked pessimistic and asked where he got the flowers. He pointed out the window towards a neighbor's garden! The matter had to be set straight with the neighbor and the little boy learned a valuable lesson, but could you imagine the parents or even the neighbor getting really angry with the little boy? He thought he was doing the right thing and didn't know better.

When we are living to please God with all our hearts, we may do something wrong unintentionally or unknowingly. God can not dismiss or excuse our behavior, but he certainly is more than willing to forgive us than we are to be forgiven. Even when we knowingly do wrong, God will forgive. Unfortunately, the only way we learn some things is by making mistakes. And our worst sins are not those which we commit, but good left undone and missed opportunities.

### ***Tragic Consequences of Missing God's Purpose***

In the history of the Christian Church, truth was generally held to be of more importance than relationships. Being right was far more important than having friends. Because many entertained a distorted concept of God's purpose for the church, Christians burned other Christians at the stake and sent their children to free Jerusalem from the Muslims. If a woman was accused of being a witch, her own children helped stone her to death. We call this period of history "the dark ages."

As recently as thirty years ago, a pastor I knew still showed some vestiges of middle age thinking. I showed slides of our youth center in Austria and he noticed some long-haired young men in the pictures. He asked me how I could allow such worldliness. I explained that we went out into the streets and invited young people in so they could hear the gospel. Many of these young people were drug

addicts who had never experienced Christian love. The pastor remained indignant and said that he would never allow a boy to attend his youth meetings if he had long hair.

I noted later that there was a near life-sized portrait of the (long-haired) Good Shepherd holding a lamb hanging on the wall of his church's sanctuary. Solomon's famous "Head of Christ" was printed on the offering envelopes and, because it was February, the church bulletin honored George Washington (wearing a powdered wig) and Abe Lincoln, whose hair would have prevented him from attending that church.

That pastor was intent on making his church theologically pure and his flock free of blemish. He proudly stated to all who would listen that he would never compromise the truth, and one by one, members left and joined other churches until only a handful remained. On his death bed, he told his wife, "You are the only friend I have left."

Few pastors today are like the one I just described, but not a few are guilty of making personal relationships their main concern. They adjust their preaching and programs according to what brings the people in.

This should not surprise us, because in our "age of enlightenment," the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction. We hear a lot of talk about tolerance, while fundamentalism or dogmatism (truth) is regarded as public enemy number one. According to the modern concept of toleration, everyone does what he or she wants and tolerates others who do their own thing. Anyone who suggests that there are certain established rules to follow will be viciously attacked as a fundamentalist.

Many politicians lack convictions which would qualify them to be leaders. Instead, they follow opinion

polls, seek the favor of their party and try to impress the press.

Political correctness demands that we discard moral standards and common sense for the sake of relationships. To a great extent, ethics and values have been discarded in favor of relationships.

Neither relationships nor truth can be properly comprehended unless we accept God's purpose for our lives.

### ***Counter-Productive Religion***

Priests and Clergy of the middle ages attempted to eliminate infidels by insisting that everyone believe their concept of truth. Even the slightest departure from truth was declared to be heresy. As a result, the church produced infidels who were afraid to believe anything for fear of excommunication, being tortured or burned at the stake. Human lives, of peasants in particular, were cheap and expendable.

Modern prophets of tolerance have become exactly that which they despise most – intolerant fundamentalists! They are intolerant of anyone who stands for anything and they are not content until everyone blesses their own agenda. They insist that toleration is necessary if people with differing viewpoints are to peacefully coexist, yet they reject any and all differing viewpoints!

### ***A Disturbing Trend in Today's Churches***

As recently as the 40s, most North American congregations were still relatively legalistic. Adherence to a rigid code of behavior and dress was expected of every Christian, and church members were dismissed for not abiding by the church covenant.

Today, tolerant churches are growing in numbers while the legalistic variety has become nearly extinct.

Personal relationships claim center stage in most churches, while biblical truth takes a back seat. Even in churches which claim to be evangelical or fundamentalist, little concern is shown regarding what members watch on TV or how they act when no one is looking. Activities which were not permissible on Sunday or which were considered worldly and thus taboo half a century ago are now considered to be matters of personal discernment. Virtually no church sets guidelines for personal habits and dress outside the church. And what is worn to church these days doesn't seem to matter much either.

When differences arise between members, toleration is urged rather than seeking a consensus. The objective is not resolving conflict, but to show tolerance. Those who do not tolerate are accused of being unspiritual, unloving and divisive.

The tragedy of all this, is that many churches have apparently lost sight of God's objective and purpose for the church. The church which Jesus Christ founded is not a bunch of wishy-washy namby-pambies tolerating each other, nor is it a dictatorship of one or a few whom others follow blindly. Whether our highest objective is defending our interpretation of truth or gaining a large following, we have lost sight of Christ's objective for his church. A good Christian leader is not one who gets others to agree with him or to follow him, but one who motivates people to seek fellowship with God and to obey him. The true church is one which collectively seeks to attain God's objectives.

Jesus chose twelve disciples who certainly didn't meet his expectations, but they believed and sought to obey. Jesus enjoyed fellowship with them even though they argued with each other about who would be greatest in the kingdom. They disappointed him, denied him and deserted him when he needed them most. They caused

him much anguish and heartache, but he promised never to leave nor forsake them.

### ***Divided Pharisees***

In the fifty years prior to Christ's birth, Shammai and Hillel were the leading teachers in Israel, and their influence was felt for many decades afterward. Numerous heated debates between the schools of Hillel and Shammai were fueled by "truth/relationships" type of thinking. Both men represented Pharisaic thought, but they differed strongly in their interpretations of the law. Shammai was strongly truth oriented, while Hillel gave relationships more priority. Shammai was known to be harsh, dogmatic and legalistic, adhering to strict legalistic interpretations of the *Torah*. In seeking to establish doctrinal purity, he showed little concern for how this was received by the Jewish people.

Hillel, on the other hand, allowed for more "humane" interpretations of the law and showed a readiness to compromise on minor issues. He recognized that Jews were becoming increasingly frustrated with pharisaic legalism, and it affected their allegiance to the temple and their faith in God. He too held to a strict interpretation of the *Torah*, but he sought interpretations that appealed to the masses and recommended milder punishment when people transgressed.

The most famous of Hillel's enactments was the *Prosbul*, which insured repayment of loans in spite of the law concerning the year of jubilee (Deuteronomy 15). The law protected both the creditor against loss and the needy against being refused a loan. He also interpreted rulings on the sale of houses and confirmed the legitimacy of certain Alexandrian Jews, whose origin was disputed and enacted many other popular measures.

The Hillite school thus gained in popularity among the Jewish people, but there was still a huge gap between them and the common people. The average Jew lived in situations where conflicts of interest were prevalent and common. They were fully integrated in society and had to deal regularly with foreigners, merchants and unethical government officials. It was extremely difficult for them to live according to Pharisaical law in all these relationships. The Pharisees, however, lived apart from the people and made their own rules. Jesus said of them, *For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.*

Both the Shammite and Hillite Pharisees failed to recognize their own infallibility and to seek a humble, submissive relationship with God. They were immensely proud and their primary objective appears to have been increasing their own political power base.

I won't spend much time discussing the Sadducees, Herodians, Essenes and Zealots here, but these Jewish groups also contributed to the general confusion and division of the times. In his book, *The Ruling Class of Judea*, Martin Goodman (Cambridge University Press, 1987) shows that infighting among and between Jewish ruling classes contributed heavily to situations ultimately leading to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

Leaders of the Jews were jealous of the attention Jesus was getting and in John 7:16, they asked him for his credentials. Jesus replied, *If any man will do his [God's] will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.*

According to Jesus, the key to understanding God's Word lies in our desire to serve God and not in gaining knowledge about God. If personal faith in God through Jesus Christ is not our ultimate objective, conflicts in both

interpersonal and in group relationships are inevitable. Man without personal faith in God will always be in conflict, either with his conscience, his neighbors or both. He may attempt compromises, trying to please everyone and wondering why no one including himself is happy. Or he could become a hard-nosed legalist with few friends. Man without faith in God is like a ship with no destination or purpose. Only faith in God through Jesus Christ can bring true unity of purpose. Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

*...till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:13)*

Christians who share the same objective, knowing and pleasing God, can enjoy good fellowship even if they have different understandings of truth. This is the unity which Jesus was speaking of in John 17. What Jesus desires for his followers is that same close fellowship and ministry which he enjoys with his heavenly Father.

The seemingly insurmountable problems that divided the Pharisees still divide Christians, churches and Christian organizations today. The next chapters will illustrate this truth.

## **CHAPTER 14**

### **PACIFISM AND VIOLENCE**

A major conflict that broiled between the Hillite and Shammite schools has been a divisive factor throughout history, both in Judaism and Christianity. In fact, it is an issue which divides America today.

How rigid is God's law? Should it be enforced? If so, how and by whom? If, on the other hand, adherence to truth is to be strictly voluntary, how should Christians respond when disobedience of others has a negative effect on our personal welfare, family, society or the church?

There are different shades of pacifism. Extreme pacifists believe that God is the only one who may enforce his law and punish transgressors. Others concede that it is permissible to defend the nation and family, but they refuse to retaliate with force if attacked personally.

A large segment of Christianity views law enforcement and military service as a "necessary evil." It is interesting to note that conservative Christians are the most stalwart supporters of US military action in Iraq and the staunchest proponents of the death penalty.

The majority of pacifists in our society today are humanists who have little or nothing to do with church and religion. They are quite vocal in their opposition to Americans fighting a war anywhere for any reason and oppose private possession of firearms. If they think that the rights of a convicted criminal are being violated or when someone mistreats a dog, they become very irate, yet those same individuals will fight for their "constitutional right" to kill and recycle unborn babies!

## ***Religious Wars***

Pope Urban II began the crusades against the Turks in 1095, in order to free the Holy Land and Jerusalem from Muslim control. An estimated three million lives were lost in these battles which lasted about 200 years. Muslims are extremely critical of the crusaders, yet they have shed considerably more blood in their own European and Asian conquests.

In May, 2005, Newsweek reported that interrogators at the Guantanamo Bay Prison desecrated the Koran by tossing it in a toilet (a statement that was later retracted). Immediately, violence erupted in Afghanistan and other Muslim nations against Americans, resulting in many deaths.

Bibles are forbidden reading material in nearly all Muslim nations, and if discovered, the Bibles are confiscated and destroyed. Anyone caught with a Bible is imprisoned and not infrequently persecuted. On the other hand, a Koran can be purchased in any American bookstore, and all public libraries contain copies of the Muslim holy book. A foreigner living in America can publicly desecrate a Bible and get away with it, but few Americans would dare to desecrate a Koran for fear of legal consequences.

During the middle ages, tens of thousands of Waldensian Christians were slaughtered by their Roman Catholic “brothers.” During the reformation and counter reformation, both Catholics and Lutherans defended their homeland against invading Turks, but most Anabaptists refused to bear arms for any reason whatsoever. Martin Luther at first opposed the use of violence in suppressing the growing Anabaptist movement, but later encouraged it. After 30,000 to 50,000 Anabaptists were killed by both Catholics and Lutherans, a few Anabaptists did take up arms to defend themselves, resulting in sharp internal

differences. The “*schwertler*” (sword-bearers) and “*staebler*” (staff-bearers) are still divided today. Most Mennonite and Amish groups are pacifist, as are Jehovah’s Witnesses, but few major Christian denominations oppose the use of military force or armed police officers.

Millions of Jews were slaughtered by the Nazis while protestant and Catholic church leaders looked on in silent consent. Of those Christians who believed the holocaust was wrong, pacifists refused to go to war against Hitler, while others saw this as their patriotic and Christian obligation.

### ***Understanding Jesus***

At the root of the controversy is our understanding of the teachings of Christ, the Sermon on the Mount in particular (see Chapter 19). Pacifists argue that if we are to turn the other cheek when struck by an enemy, how can we justify bearing arms in self defense? Jesus even instructed us to do good to them that persecute us. Although he overthrew the tables of corrupt money changers and sellers of animals in the temple, and he once cursed a barren fig tree, he never used or espoused violence against people.

On the other hand, there are Christians who point to the biblical injunction to be subject to those who have rule over us. Paul wrote in Romans 13:1-6, *Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for*

*good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.*

These Christians ask, "How can evil be overcome if we do not resort to force?"

Neither Jesus nor the Apostles criticized the use of military force and on one occasion, Jesus said in Matthew 10:34-36, *Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.*

Much controversy has centered around the words of Jesus in Luke 22:36-38, *Then said he unto them, But now, he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise his scrip: and he that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one. For I say unto you, that this that is written must yet be accomplished in me, And he was reckoned among the transgressors: for the things concerning me have an end. And they said, Lord, behold, here are two swords. And he said unto them, It is enough.*

The matter becomes even more controversial when discussing the use of force in other realms of life. Some parents believe in spanking their children when they are disobedient and others argue that this is wrong. The latter resort to appeasing, bribing, threatening, denying of TV time or confinement to a bedroom. But what parent simply turns the other cheek?

If we have a responsibility to discipline our children, are we not also responsible to prevent and punish crime in

society? Would it be proper to use violent means to prevent a man from raping a teenage girl or from robbing an elderly woman?

Taking the matter even further, is it permissible to inflict pain or bodily injury for any reason whatsoever? How about surgery? If the ends justify the means, then fighting evil with a weapon is little different from cutting out a cancerous growth with a scalpel. Athletes train until they hurt all over. They do this to keep in condition, and as a result, the opponent gets hurt.

We had a married couple in the Austrian Bible Institute whose unruly children were causing problems. Several times, I requested the parents to try to keep them under control, but it was of no use. They would scold the kids, scream at them and call them unflattering names, but they didn't believe in spanking them. In desperation, I once called them aside and said that God had created children with a generous portion of fat on their posteriors that was ideal for "rearing" unruly children. They were horrified and let me know that this was contrary to the teachings of Jesus. I then said that a firm swat on their behinds would sting for a while, but screaming at them and calling them names could injure them for life. I never asked them how they managed to do it, but those kids soon learned to behave!

Of all the philosophical, ideological and theological differences between Christians, this is perhaps one of the most difficult to resolve. And Christians will probably never be united on the matter this side of heaven. If you were hoping that I would give you the perfect solution, I am sorry to disappoint you. I sometimes feel obliged to make compromises as already mentioned in the previous chapter. But when our main objective is discovering and following God's will, he will guide us.

The next two chapters also deal with serious problem areas in the Christian Church.

## CHAPTER 15

### ADULTERY

Some theologians believe that it was disciples of Shammai who brought the adulteress to Jesus in John 8, but it could also have been the disciples of Hillel. The Pharisees claimed that the woman had been “taken in the very act of adultery” and there were apparently three witnesses, as mandated by Moses. The *Torah* demanded that such an individual be stoned.

The object of this scenario was obviously to force Jesus to take sides in the heated debates between the Hillite and Shammite schools. Followers of Shammai insisted on punishment in accordance to the law of Moses, but Gamaliel would have recommended a milder form of punishment. The adulteress would certainly have been publicly ostracized and perhaps even beaten, but not stoned to death.

The Jews hoped to trap Jesus in this hostile environment, but Jesus reacted differently. He stooped and wrote something in the dirt. What Jesus wrote has been the subject of much conjecture and we can only imagine what he wrote.

How could the woman have been “taken in the very act” without insider information? And doesn’t it seem strange that there were witnesses? One of the witnesses would have been the man with whom she committed this sin. He would have had to complete the act with her in order for her to be found guilty. It was very fitting that Jesus wrote in dirt!

Jesus made a simple statement and returned to his writing. Although we don't know what he wrote, his statement gives us some indication. Jesus said to the men, *He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone.* Jesus was obviously referring to a sin deserving of death, probably adultery. It had become customary to punish only women for adultery, but according to Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22, both perpetrators were to be put to death. If there were witnesses, where was the adulterer? Jesus put the Pharisees themselves on trial, and one after another, they quietly slipped away.

Some readers might be inclined to argue that this is no longer a divisive matter in our churches today. All good Christians agree that adultery is wrong and no one would insist on the death penalty. I can name several churches, however, that split after their pastor had an affair. All concerned insisted that it was wrong, but they disagreed violently over the matter of forgiveness. Some wanted to retain their repentant pastor while others insisted that he could no longer hold that position. I would call that divisive! If you are wondering where I stand on this, read the rest of the book!

## CHAPTER 16

### DIVORCE

The matter of divorce also serves to illustrate the sharp dissention between the schools of Shammai and Hillel.

According to Deuteronomy 24:1, *Moses allowed a man to divorce his wife under certain circumstances. When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house.*

Both Pharisaic groups viewed the Torah as the infallible Word of God, but hefty arguments prevailed among Jewish leaders as to what Moses meant by the word “uncleanness.” Shammai taught that a man was allowed to divorce his wife only if she committed adultery and if witnesses attested to this. He argued that marriage was for keeps and could not be divorced, using Malachi 2:14-16 to support his position.

Rabbi Hillel taught that the Hebrew word “uncleanness” which Moses used, can be defined as “something evil” or even “disobedience.” According to Hillel, a man could give his wife a letter of divorce if she refused to obey him or even burned his food! Rabbi Akiba, a representative of the Hillite school who died in 135 AD, expanded this interpretation to allow a man to divorce his wife if he found another who was 161

Rabban Gamaliel more desirable!

When Pharisees questioned Jesus about divorce in Matthew 19:3-9, they were obviously referring to this heated debate. Judging from their reaction, it must have caught the disciples somewhat by surprise, that Jesus' response seemed closer to the position of Shammai than to Hillel's.

The matter of divorce and remarriage is a divisive issue in Christian circles today, but not because Christians are uncertain about God's perfect plan for man and woman. Like the Hillites and Shammites, most Christians agree that God created man and woman in a manner that makes them compatible and fruitful. A couple with differences should attempt to resolve them and get on with life. We even offer help, called "marriage counseling." Nearly all Christians support the admonition not to separate what God has joined together (Matthew 19:6). There is little difference of opinion on the basic principles of marriage. Marriage is for keeps and divorce is not right in God's eyes.

Unfortunately, the perfect woman and perfect man existed only once and that didn't last long. Since Adam and Eve sinned, men have been arguing about how to deal with problems and imperfections that disrupt harmonious relationships and threaten to destroy marriages.

It is when all efforts to save a marriage fail and a couple separates, that Christians find it difficult to agree on what to do about it. The purists make it virtually impossible for such individuals to join their church and if they are already members, they are all but escorted to the exit. They are more like the Shammite Pharisees.

Because divorces are abundant, few churches can afford to take such a radical stand today. Some churches allow divorcees to be members but exclude them from certain ministries and offices. Other Churches exclude

divorcees from participating in communion or mass, but a rapidly growing segment of Christianity contends that God's forgiveness is all-inclusive without further consequences. Not a few churches offer small groups for divorcees, complete with social functions and outings, just as there are groups for teenagers, college students, young couples and senior citizens.

The same arguments which separated the Pharisees still divide Christians today, as the following story illustrates.

A young man of my acquaintance lost his wife in a tragic accident and was left with a 2-year old daughter to care for. He was a church member in good standing who served as a Deacon, taught Sunday School and even preached on occasion.

In the same church was a divorced mother of two well-disciplined children. She married young, endured much hardship living with an alcoholic husband who had repeated affairs with other women. After obtaining a divorce, she was invited to evangelistic meetings where she became a Christian. She was baptized, joined the church and was well-liked by everyone.

A friendly relationship developed between these two Christians, and they eventually married in a quiet court ceremony. They now have two children of their own in addition to the three children from previous marriages. They are still members of the church, but he may no longer preach, teach or hold an office. A large segment of the congregation feels that this is unfair, and a few think the pastor should have counseled them more aggressively not to marry.

Situations like this are not as rare as one might think. Many pastors have lost much sleep and not a few their jobs for the way they acted or neglected to act in similar situations. What would your response have been? Would

you show compassion, urge fellow members to be tolerant or insist on church discipline? And most important, would you speak personally to the persons involved, consider it to be the Pastor's business, voice your opinions to others or just keep them to yourself? Or would that depend on who is involved?

A prominent European church leader recently caused a furor when he gave a speech on the subject of divorce and remarriage at a conference of pastors. He contended that it is Biblically permissible for divorced Christians to remarry even if the former spouse is still living. A number of his clergy colleagues responded by writing long rebuttals of his proposal in various church publications. Both sides of the debate quoted scripture and gave examples to underscore their positions.

The most outspoken opponent of permitting divorcees to remarry conceded that this is sometimes the "lesser evil." He went on to expound on the dilemma of young mothers trying desperately to raise their children with no father and being forced to work long, hard hours in order to provide for them. He added that it is perhaps possible for a young divorced man to remain sexually abstinent for the rest of his life, but experience teaches that this seldom happens. For one thing, there are many attractive women who are desperate for a husband, and they don't care if he was previously married.

So what was this Christian leader saying? To me it sounded like he was complaining that God was unfair to young divorcees, but they would just have to live with it or sin by remarrying!

This was the kind of thing that divided Jewish leaders in Jesus' day. Their arguments failed to follow the rules of sound logic, which I will deal with in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 17

### LOGIC

If the Pharisees thought logically, they would have had to concede that Moses was opposed to divorce and considered it to be wrong. Jesus had to explain that Moses made a law allowing for divorce because of “the hardness of men’s hearts.” Moses recognized the condition but in no way condoned it. The condition demanded action on his part.

We face the same dilemma in our churches today. Some couples resolve their differences while others get divorced. Making matters even more complicated, some divorcees attempt a second marriage “for better or for worse,” but not always “until death do them part.”

And the problems go far beyond the matter of divorce. If a couple lives together for a few years without marrying, does this prevent them from marrying someone else? If a person living with a partner out of wedlock is converted but the other is not, do we encourage them to marry or separate? What if they have children?

One of my roommates in Bible College was engaged to a fine Christian girl. A dean of the school spoke with him, asking if he had ever had a sexual relationship with someone else. He admitted that he had. The dean replied that according to scriptures “they had become one flesh” (I Corinthians 6:16) and were already married in God’s sight. Marrying his fiancée would constitute living in adultery.

My roommate was devastated. He confided to me that the girl with whom he had committed this act was his own sister who was now happily married. If the Dean had

known this fact, he might have advised differently, but would that have been consistent and logical?

### ***Truth Without Logic***

If we accept God's Word as truth, logic can help us understand it. God not only gave us the Bible, but he created us with the capacity to think rationally and logically. The Bible gives clear and precise instructions on what to do and how to act in most everyday situations, and logic can in no way replace the scriptures, but it is the best tool for understanding them, and it is often our only recourse when the Bible is silent or unclear on a matter.

The widespread acceptance of homosexuality in modern society creates problems for both Christians and church leaders. Clear scriptural injunctions leave no doubt about what God thinks of such relationships, but the Bible offers little help in dealing with related problems which emerge from such relationships. There are situations in the workplace, at school and even in our families which demand much prayerful consideration before we can decide how to act, react or not act at all.

Doctors and nurses who refuse to perform or assist in abortions can lose their jobs. Teachers who decline to teach evolution or suggest that there is a Creator face the same prospects. A person can argue that these individuals should seek other employment, but what about all those who work on the periphery, in some way contributing to evil?

Jesus opened difficult passages of scripture by using simple illustrations, parables and logical argumentation. And the common people "heard him gladly" (Matthew 12:37). But the Scribes and Pharisees were so intent on redefining truth that they had become totally illogical. Jesus mentioned some of their foolish traditions in Matthew 23.

He accused the Pharisees of enlarging the borders of their garments. These “borders” were tassels or fringes sewn onto the edge of nearly all Jewish garments to distinguish them from non-Jews. They also adorned garments worn by Jesus (Matthew 9:20 and 14:36). This custom was commanded in Numbers 15:37-39, but probably only intended for formal wear. At some time, it became customary to sew fringes on nearly all garments, but the Pharisees were not content to have borders like everyone else. They wanted to be recognized as being more religious, so they vied with each other to see who could come up with the largest and most ornate borders.

It was a similar situation with phylacteries. Moses commanded the Israelites to continually keep God’s commandments before them (Deuteronomy 6 and 11). They were to be reminded at all times of that which pleased and displeased God. It soon became customary for Jews to wear small leather boxes containing quotations from the Pentateuch (books of Moses) on the back of their hands and on their foreheads. The boxes, however, were seldom if ever opened and the contents read. At the time of Christ, phylacteries were worn by every male Israelite above 13 years of age during morning prayer, but the Pharisees had larger, more prominent phylacteries, and they were probably worn at all times. The phylacteries had become cult objects and were viewed as amulets or good luck charms which could ward off evil.

There are many other examples, such as ceremonial washings and counting the grains of their spices in order to give an exact tithe. But this must suffice. The lack of good logic was a problem of religious leaders in Israel during the life of Christ. The Pharisees concocted complicated trivial laws which were presented as truth, yet they totally ignored important scriptural injunctions. Their

silly rules and the endless arguments which evolved from them would make a great stage comedy!

### ***Christians Without Logic***

Before we scoff too much at the nonsense of the Pharisees, we should honestly ask ourselves if we too are guilty of illogical statements or beliefs. There are, in fact, many Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century who seem just as incapable of using sound logic as the Pharisees.

In his book *Escape from Reason*, Francis Schaeffer shows how people tend to be schizophrenic in separating the spiritual from the physical. They can exist on either side of the divide – in the spiritual or physical realm – and comfortably switch sides, but never the twain shall meet!

When thinking theologically, the real world tends to get out of focus, and these people become all but oblivious to the obvious. Their heavenly spirituality seldom gets down to earth.

On the other hand, these same individuals find it next to impossible to apply spiritual principles in every day situations. On Sunday, God is real, but from Monday through Saturday, he is kept at a distance.

A lady in our church once read about a miracle healer and asked me why God didn't heal people in our church. I named three instances within the past year in which people were miraculously healed, including her own husband! He was not a Christian but told everyone that he was alive only because the church people prayed for him. Another woman with cancer had been written off by doctors, and the family was told to prepare her funeral. But a month later, doctors found no evidence of the cancer. She too was not a believer but told everyone that her daughter's prayers were responsible for her healing (when I saw her last, she was 89!). The third person was the Director of our Bible Institute, who had a massive

heart attack. Doctors expected him to die, but many Christians prayed and he came back to full strength within a few weeks. My questioner didn't view these as miracle healings because they didn't take place on a stage with a "miracle healer" serving as Master of Ceremonies!

The Bible teaches that there is life after death and that followers of Christ will spend eternity in heaven, but most Christians live as though death is the end of everything worth living for. Whatever lies beyond the grave is not worth dying for. When these individuals get old or terminally ill, they do everything in their power and spend huge sums of money to prolong their sufferings a few more months. Heaven can't be that bad, can it?

I hear many Christians criticizing the liberal agenda of the media and the emphasis on sex and violence on TV, yet those same people digest it for hours on end. I have given up on television, radio and newspaper reporting and turn to internet bloggers for information. There is no guarantee that what I read on the web is accurate, but false claims can at least be researched and countered.

A young man who claimed to be a Christian, once told me that only an uneducated fool would believe the Biblical creation account. I countered by saying that only educated fools believe the theory of evolution. Since we had both taken science courses in college, we were at a stalemate.

He then asked, "Do you believe that the world has four corners and rests on pillars?" I smiled and reminded him that the Bible also says the earth is round (Isaiah 40:22). And that was written when smart people like him thought it was square!

I added that he should be scientifically consequent. It can be scientifically proven that there is no such thing as a sunset or sunrise. It never rains cats and dogs, and he can't gaze at the full moon with his girl friend. They can, at

best, see the side facing them, and since the astronauts brought a few rocks back to earth, there are no more full moons. From now on, he and his girlfriend can only gaze at what is left of the moon to the extent in which the sun illuminates it. How romantic!

God told Abraham that his seed would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens and as the sand of the seashore. No Christian of my acquaintance would argue that the number of sand kernels, the number of stars in the sky and the number of Abraham's descendants is identical. God was simply telling Abraham that his seed would be innumerable. In Deuteronomy 1:10-11, Moses said, *The LORD your God hath multiplied you, and, behold, ye are this day as the stars of heaven for multitude. The LORD God of your fathers make you a thousand times so many more as ye are, and bless you, as he hath promised you!* Genesis 41:49 reads, *Joseph gathered very much grain, as the sand of the sea, until he stopped counting, for it was immeasurable.* That may not be a scientific statement, but it does make sense.

Some Christians teach that we should have regular foot washings in our churches because the Bible tells us to do this. My logic tells me that the reason for foot washings was because visitors walked long distances and arrived with dirty feet. No one would show up at a foot washing service today with dirty feet! It would be more appropriate for church members to wash each other's cars.

There are churches which require women to cover their heads in church because the Bible commands it. Like the Pharisees, proponents have further refined and defined the rules. Some assemblies prescribe a certain type of head covering while others leave this up to the discretion of the wearer. Ladies may remove their head coverings during certain parts of the service and must replace them at other appointed times. Visitors may be puzzled or

amused by all this, but if asked, the elders can explain in detail why the ritual is necessary.

Again, logic tells me that head coverings had cultural implications. Forbidding women to wear apparel that might tempt male members to lust or distract people's attention from the sermon would seem to be a better idea today.

I read of an Italian priest whose parish was located on the Adriatic Sea. He became upset when vacationers entered his church in their swim suits and bikinis, so he started giving them apples. When they asked what the apple was for, he would reply, "I read in the Bible that when Adam and Eve ate the fruit, their eyes were opened and they saw that they were naked!" That might not bother some pastors as long as women have their heads covered!

Many people would like to believe that their sins are just mistakes, but one Christian once tried to convince me that all mistakes are sin. I bent a few nails when learning the carpenter trade, and I still miss them on occasion. I once came to church wearing a bandage on my left forefinger. When people asked what happened, I told them that I had used a hammer according to scripture. I then quoted Matthew 6:3, *Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth*. I was suffering from my mistake, but according to that person, hitting the wrong nail was a sin and I should have sought God's forgiveness!

Few readers would agree with that person's position, but if I claim that Jesus made mistakes, would you think I am being heretical? Might Jesus have stumbled while learning to walk, or could he have made a few grammatical mistakes when learning to speak or write Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic?

## *My Commissioning Service*

In 38 years of missionary service, I served as pastor of several churches, baptized converts, married couples and conducted funerals. I ran a printing and publishing operation, worked with drug addicts, helped start an international youth organization and founded a Bible Institute. But I am not an ordained minister. I once appeared before an ordination council, but I flunked.

In my ordination council, a pastor asked me if it was possible for a person who never heard the gospel to be saved. I quoted the passage, *How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!* (Romans 10:14-15).

I was reprimanded to give only “yes” or “no” answers unless prompted for an explanation. I then shocked the pastors present by answering in the affirmative. This time, I was asked to explain myself. I said that “with God, all things are possible” and that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, *For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse* (Romans 1:20).

The men were not happy with my answer, and even quoting scripture to support it failed to change their opinion. Anyone who has been ordained can tell you that the standard answer to this question is an emphatic “No!”

Another question asked was, “How many chapters are there in the book of Isaiah?” I said that I thought there were 64 or 65, but the questioner chided me for my ignorance. I should have known that Isaiah has 66

chapters divided into two parts of 39 and 27 chapters respectively. According to this pastor, the divisions in the book of Isaiah were God's affirmation of the biblical canon. I argued that to my knowledge, chapter and verse divisions were not inspired of God. Using the same logic, someone might claim that Psalms proves there are 150 books in five testaments!

The final blow came when a pastor lifted his Bible in the air and asked if there was any error in it. I asked what he meant by his question, but he said he only wanted a "yes" or "no" reply. Again, I answered in the affirmative but was not permitted to explain why. His Bible was a King James Version with Schofield notes and Schofield takes issue with the translation of a few verses. Either Schofield or the translators must have been wrong. The council refused to ordain me as a minister but decided that I could be ordained as a missionary! So much for logic!

### ***Heavenly and Earthly Logic***

What appears to be logical by worldly standards, may not be true logic if we consider the power of God and his Word. You see, there are two opposing forces at work in this world, the forces of fallen nature and the power of God.

In nature, every living thing is under the curse of sin and must die. Sickness is contagious and not health. Children must be taught to behave; being naughty comes quite naturally. The only exception to this rule is light, which is not of this world and thus not under the curse. The smallest light is stronger than the greatest darkness. In the world, darkness prevails, but God's light can penetrate that darkness. God says, *So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.* Isaiah 55:11

God makes new creatures of those who believe in him, and they will live eternally. Jesus is the Light of the world, but he says that we too are to be the light of the world.

We must learn to subordinate human logic to the power of God. Earthly logic tells us that someone with a highly contagious disease should be quarantined and dangerous animals should be kept away from little children. But Jesus healed lepers, touching them in the process. When he sent the seventy disciples out in Luke 10, he said, “I send you as lambs among wolves.” What shepherd in his right mind would do that? Jesus did it and it was perfectly logical to him.

In the parable of the wheat and the tares, the farmer doesn’t try to pull out the weeds. There are times and situations in which we should use church discipline to rid the flock of a bad influence, but the collective influence of God’s people should be greater than that of a few tares. All too often, church leaders work hard to remove “tares” when they should be spending time counseling them.

### ***Scribes and Pharisees Without Logic***

Gamaliel was a widely recognized Rabbi, but he and his colleagues seemed incapable of thinking logically. And they were training the next generation of Rabbis which promised to be no better.

Jesus made these “super-spiritual” Pharisees appear as fools. Even at 12 years, he confounded the doctors of law with his questions and wisdom. When he began his public ministry, Jewish leaders became more frequently embarrassed by his teachings, and the positive reaction of the people rubbed salt into their wounded egos. The scriptures were recognized as authoritative by both Jesus and the Pharisees, but *Jesus taught as one having authority and not as the scribes* (Matthew 7:29).

Just days before the crucifixion, many pilgrims and residents of Jerusalem laid down branches and cloaks in the street and shouted “Hosanna!” as Jesus entered Jerusalem. They saw in Jesus the fulfillment of their Messianic expectations. “Hosanna!” was originally a prayer requesting God’s help (Ps. 118:25), but it had become a rousing call for the anticipated Messiah. “Hosanna!” combines the Hebrew words for “victory” and “salvation.” Incidentally, the greeting, *Sieg-Heil!*, with which Germans and Austrians greeted their *fuehrer* Adolf Hitler, has the same meaning!

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he rode on a lowly donkey and did not come as a conqueror on a prancing horse. That pleased the people, but it didn’t meet the expectations of the Pharisees. They looked for a powerful ruler who would free Israel from the shackles of Rome. But they were not looking for a Messiah whom they could serve but for one who would elevate them to great honor. Jesus, however, sought faithful followers and not egoistic masters! Jesus refused to dance to the Pharisee’s music (Luke 7:30-32).

The Pharisees and Scribes had been predicting the coming of the Messiah and should have been first to recognize the fulfillment of prophecy. Instead, they attempted futilely to find fault in Jesus. When that failed, they finally succeeded in crucifying him by using bribery, making false accusations and applying political pressure.

The miracles of Jesus were known to all the people, and tens of thousands followed him and listened intently to his sermons. The Jewish people knew that the Pharisees, Sadducees and High Priests hated Jesus, and they knew why they crucified him.

The disciples of Jesus claimed that their Lord had risen from the dead and that he was alive and well. They had seen him and talked to him. Unlike the Sadducees,

Pharisees held the doctrine of the resurrection in high regard, yet their only reaction to this claim was to contend that it could not have happened. Like his colleagues, Saul too believed that the Christians were spreading false teachings, but he alone seemed to recognize that the Pharisees would continue to lose their following if nothing was done to stop the rapid spread of Christian teachings. Saul logically concluded that more effective measures would be necessary.

### ***Five Rules of Logical Argumentation***

I recently read two books that are as different as one could imagine, yet they have one important common denominator. One of the books is titled *Code* and was written by one of Microsoft's top men, Charles Petzold. The second book was written in 1724 by Isaac Watts, a man better known for his prolific hymn writing. Watt's book is titled, *Logic*. What both authors stress is the importance of logic. Both computing and theological debate must be grounded in sound logic if the end result is to be reliable and helpful.

Faith in God does not eliminate the need for logic. The Greek term for "word" is *logos*. It is important that we follow the basic rules of logic when debating any issue. Logic is a process of deductive reasoning. It might be better understood if we say that it is the opposite of irrational and arrogant argumentation. We are all familiar with the latter!

1. First of all, logic expects all sides to agree on the rules of debate. In no way can two sides of a debate be allowed to choose their own rules. If, for example, Christians involved in a debate on divorce agree that the Bible is the sole basis for determining a matter, then it is not permissible to depart from clear scriptural teaching, nor to treat other sources

of information as equally legitimate. If parties can not agree on the above, different rules must be found.

2. Secondly, terminology must be defined. When a politician promises to take “meaningful and significant measures,” he means nothing measurably significant. If, however, the politician promises to do something “appropriate or relevant,” we can count on him to appropriate our tax dollars for what he considers to be relevant.

People have a tendency to use complicated and unclear terminology when dealing with controversial issues. A clear definition of primary words is necessary if we hope to achieve positive results. This is especially true if words have more than one meaning. In such cases, logic requires us to decide which definition fits. It is not logical to twist meanings to fit our own agenda.

3. Thirdly, logic is consistent and consequent. A striking difference between Jesus and the religious leaders of his time was the consistency of his own teaching and the inconsequence of theirs. Over and over, Jesus called on them to be consequent. “You ask me a question; I will ask you one.” “You answer mine and I will answer yours.” Logic is consequent and the absence of logic is hypocrisy.
4. Fourthly, we must always be open for correction. Anyone who has argued with representatives of the Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons probably noticed that they only seem concerned about winning arguments. They have their agenda and are instructed not to listen to what you have to say if it counters their own position – even if you are arguing from God’s Word. I usually remind them politely that they are two persons while I am only

one. They come fully prepared in what they want to say and say it, but they are not willing to listen to my impromptu arguments from the Bible. As with most media networks, it's all about the agenda.

Even if we are absolutely certain that we are right and the other is wrong, we must be willing to listen and be open for correction if we expect this attitude in the other person. The learning process can not function without consideration of and concern for the other person.

5. Fifthly, unity does not depend on agreement. In Philippians 4:2, Paul admonished two quarreling sisters to be of one mind in the Lord. He didn't say that they were to agree. Where two or more persons are gathered together, there will never be total agreement. But in the church of Jesus Christ, we can and should honestly seek the mind of the Lord even while arguing our own positions. And we must be honest enough to admit that we are not the only ones who have access to God, his Word and the Holy Spirit. Failing to do so is hypocrisy.

I will mention a sixth rule of logical argumentation in Chapter 20.

## CHAPTER 18

### A “THEM AND US” WORLD

#### *Pharisees and Gentiles*

One of the early points of contention between Hillel and Shammai was in regards to Jewish relationships with the Gentiles. It was generally agreed by all Jews that salvation and heavenly rewards were intended solely for the Jews. Hillel taught that Gentiles who became proselytes and were circumcised could share in these blessings, but Shammai contended that even the most righteous Gentile had no part in the world to come. (See my comments on the prophet Jonah in Chapter 7)

Some thirty years before the birth of Christ, Menahem served as Vice-President of the Sanhedrin under the sage Hillel, who was President (*nasi*). According to Daniel 9, the temple in Jerusalem was to be destroyed by the Gentiles and both Hillel and Menahem believed that this was because Israel had failed to be “a light unto the Gentiles.” They suggested that reaching out to the Gentiles could move God to defer his judgment of Israel, but Shammai disagreed.

Menahem was replaced by the sage Shammai around 20 B.C. and a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud relates circumstances surrounding this move as follows: “Menahem the Essene and 160 Essene disciples left the Jewish community about 20 B.C. on a mission to the Gentiles to take the world the Noahide covenant, thus assuring obedient and observant Gentiles a place in the world to come.”

Although Hillel's popularity among the Jewish people remained high, the influence of Hillel's school in Jewish ruling circles and the Sanhedrin began to wane in favor of the more legalistic interpretations of the Shammaite school.

Some historians believe that Menahem was perhaps forced out by Shammai and his followers. Others contend that some of Hillel's disciples may have joined Menahem's mission to the Gentiles, thus enabling Shammai to gain control of the Sanhedrin. Whatever the case may have been, the Jew's relationship to the Gentiles remained a divisive issue between the schools of Hillel and Shammai long after the death of their founders.

### ***Christians and Heathen***

Adam and Eve were not willing to recognize their own faults and blamed each other, the serpent and even God. But they were fruitful and multiplied, and ever since, it has been a "them and us" world. The "them and us" mentality is not likely to disappear in the very near future. Two thousand years ago, the Jewish world-view divided people into the circumcised and uncircumcised. For Christians today, the line of demarcation is drawn between the saved and the lost, the redeemed and the heathen. As with the Jews back then, our position is largely based on where and into what circumstances we were born.

Now don't get me wrong! I am convinced that there is only one God and that he has chosen to redeem those created in his image through the death of his Son. But I am just as convinced that the gospel might have seemed less attractive had I been born in Saudi Arabia. And if my father had been one of the wealthiest men in the country, and if I had been named Osama Bin Mohammed Bin Awad Bin Laden, and if I had inherited \$80 million at 13

years of age after my father was killed in a helicopter crash —, would I still believe the same as I do today?

### ***National Pride***

During the cold war, we viewed all Russians as communists and the Russians were convinced that all Americans were capitalists. With the demise of the Iron Curtain, Russia and Eastern Europe have been able to break free from the shackles of communism, but we Americans are still obsessed with and possessed by material affluence (we don't like the term "capitalism"). Because our addiction is voluntary, we are convinced that it's okay.

At the turn of the new millennium, we Americans felt pretty good about ourselves. And we believed that there were many reasons why others should look favorably upon our great nation:

- Millions of people, mostly Europeans, migrated to America to escape persecution, poverty and political despotism. And they found freedom to worship as they desired. They were able to work, run a business and buy property. And their kids got a good education. All this would not have been possible in the "old country."
- Americans sent missionaries into all the world who built churches, schools and hospitals. They taught people to read and write, taught them how to farm and not to eat each other or shrink each other's heads.
- In 1938, American geologists discovered oil in the sands of Saudi Arabia. The Arab nations were poor and defenseless, but we made them immensely wealthy by building them refineries and then purchasing oil from them so they could buy arms from us.

- America freed Europe from the clutches of Adolf Hitler and spent a fortune to rebuild Europe and Japan.
- During the “cold war era,” one country after another fell under the rule of communism. On several occasions, it was only American intervention which prevented military takeovers.

It is the opinion of most Americans that the rest of the world should have breathed a great sigh of relief when, after the demise of the Iron Curtain and destruction of the Berlin Wall, America became the only remaining superpower. The USA seeks to bring democracy to the rest of the world, fights for human rights and distributes billions of dollars in foreign aid annually. The United States makes up only six percent of the world population yet pays a quarter of the United Nation’s annual budget and provides forty percent of international emergency aid. This in spite of the fact that most member nations consistently vote against American interests. Our nation’s track record shows that the USA pays cash for territorial expansion and doesn’t use its superior military power to gain political control over other nations. Why should anyone fear Americans, let alone hate them!

### ***A Rude Awakening***

The vicious attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 finally woke “Sleeping Beauty” from her dream world. Lady Liberty rubbed her eyes and asked if what she saw across Hudson River was for real or just a nightmare. Gradually, the entire nation began to fathom that something dreadful had happened.

Americans at first surmised that the enemy was a small handful of fanatics who had been brainwashed by the renegade Saudi ex-patriot, Osama bin Laden. But when television news broadcasts showed chanting and

flag-burning mobs in the streets of nearly every major city of the Middle East, the truth began to emerge. It was not just a handful of radicals, but nearly all Muslim nations which hated us! They considered America to be the epitome of evil and our President was the devil himself! The cold, hard reality of this fact was unsettling to say the least.

### ***International Isolation***

President Bush declared war on terrorism – against “the axis of evil” as he called it, but to his dismay, few western nations rallied to the support of what they called “America’s war.” A number of Western European nations which we had viewed as friendly allies became the most outspoken critics of our foreign policy.

In our blessed isolation, we had become clueless about what the rest of the world thought of us. Our fathers didn’t learn a whole lot when they fought on foreign soil, but the present generation of Americans knows even less. A few Americans take bus tours in Europe and other nations, but the shallow bits of information gleaned from tour guides are soon forgotten upon returning home.

So, there we have it! Muslim nations are our enemies and Europeans our critics. Certainly, we Americans stand united – but do we?

### ***Internal Division***

During the 2004 election campaign, we began to realize that our nation is sharply divided. Never before in history, not even during the Civil War, have “United” States citizens been less united than they are today. And both sides of the divide know very well that these differences are of a religious nature, involving ethics and moral values. On the one side are those who believe in prayer and accountability to God, and on the other side are

people thoroughly immersed in humanism, who believe that they should be free to act and live anyway they choose.

America suffers from a “we” and “they” malady. Since I identify with those who purport to believe in Jesus and follow his teachings, “we” refers to this group. “They” would then indicate the godless in our society. These are people who don’t care what God says. It is remarkable to note that while “they” show some semblance of unity, “we” continue to subdivide.

### ***“They” are United***

“They” - the godless people - have had their coming-out party. They have explained to everyone clearly and in great detail who they are, where they stand on most issues, what they believe and what they don’t believe.

“They” make it very clear that they want freedom to kill unborn babies and use the organs and body tissues to save lives of older people.

“They” openly claim that they evolved from monkeys, who in turn, evolved from one-celled creatures, which just happened into existence after a big bang. “They” insist that there was absolutely no intelligence involved in this process, but that great intelligence is required to perpetuate this “science.”

“They” tell us what they do in their bedrooms, who they do it with and why the public should be supportive of their lifestyles. “They” teach children in the schools that sexual expression or indulgence with any person regardless of gender is quite normal.

“They” – supported by the Supreme Court of the United States of America, forbid “us” to display religious symbols and talk to or about God in public places because this offends them. But they insist on the right to use any language they please - including the names of God and

Jesus (provided they are used irreverently) to describe what they think of us. The same Supreme Court has ruled that the U.S. Constitution guarantees them this “freedom of speech” and denies us the right to express our religious convictions if anyone is offended.

“They” go one step further. Should we read certain Bible verses within the confines of our own churches, which declare lesbians and homosexuals to be sinners, this is a “hate crime,” punishable by imprisonment. If a church or Christian college refuses to accept gays and lesbians, it loses its tax-exempt status. A Christian photographer or baker who turns down a request to promote a gay wedding celebration must pay a huge fine.

### ***“We” are Divided***

The name “Christian” should normally indicate someone who is a follower of Christ. If we do not believe or are not following the teachings of Jesus Christ, we have no right to call ourselves Christians, but many do. A person who passes bogus dollars can be prosecuted by law and a foreigner who poses as a citizen of the United States can be deported, but anyone can claim to be a Christian and get away with it, even if he or she denies all the teachings of Christ.

It is one of those many absurdities in our world for which there is no logical explanation. If I don’t get a copyright for this book, anyone can copyright it and sue me if I publish any part without written permission. The greedy godless collect royalties from hymns which the generous godly wrote. James Strong invented a numbering system for the Hebrew and Greek words of the Bible in the late 1800s. Programmers who make Bible search programs for computers must pay royalties to somebody who never met James Strong for the privilege of integrating his numbering system into their programs.

When I tell people that I am a Christian, I do not identify with the imposters, but with those who at least make an honest effort to learn and follow the teachings of Jesus Christ.

“We” Christians are divided on what we believe and how we should respond to godless “liberals.” Some Christians maintain that religion is a personal matter between God and men; we have no right to meddle in the personal affairs of others.

“We” waste precious time arguing about politically correct terminology while “they” cuss us in unison.

And “we” can expect little guidance from our churches, for most are divided into club-like factions that have little to do with each other. The purpose of many churches is similar to that of a golf club, a secret lodge, the volunteer fire company or the corner bar. It is a meeting place for likeminded people who share the same interests and prejudices, and where social interaction takes place. The average church is only different from the above named secular institutions in that there is less fellowship and more dissention. During church services, people sit in rows looking at the next person’s hair or lack of it. Most fellowship between members takes place during the week at bingo games, church suppers and on bus trips.

A few churches claim to “take a firm stand on issues” and to “preach the Word of God unequivocally without compromise.” But the firm stand and preaching of truth are generally confined to the church sanctuary. Such churches call themselves “evangelical,” “fundamental” or “Bible believing,” but the wishy-washy kind of churches call them “separatists.”

### ***Jesus Was Neither a Separatist Nor Ecumenical***

A careful study of the gospels shows that there was a distinct difference between the way Jesus and most Jews

related to “the unclean” around them. Pharisees separated themselves from lepers, tax collectors, women of ill repute, Samaritans and Jews who held differing views from their own. They also avoided contact with the common people.

Jesus mixed with all of these people and also ate in the homes of leading scribes and Pharisees. The Pharisees were obsessed with keeping themselves clean and preserving the purity of truth, but Jesus was intent on making sinners clean and teaching truth to the impure.

The disciples of Jesus seemed to have problems in this area too. In Mark 9:39, Jesus reprimanded his “beloved disciple” John for an exclusivist attitude. Earlier in the same chapter, the disciples unsuccessfully tried to cast out a devil, but now John brags that he forbade another person to cast out demons in Jesus’ name. The reason? “He followeth not us.”

### ***“We” and “Them” Today***

During the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the trend in mainline churches and denominations was towards ecumenism. Even those Christians critical of the ecumenical movement usually cooperated in evangelistic outreach with other churches. Denominational projects and missions were strongly supported. Today, it is more popular to be exclusive and independent.

After helping a man look for his lost car keys on a beach, I offered him a tract. He said he was a Christian and asked where I was from. I said that I was a missionary on furlough. Then began a cautious question and answer session which might have lasted well into the night if I had not given a wrong answer. Before he could have any more than a superfluous relationship with me, he needed to know if I had the same “stable smell.” We were both surprised to discover that we thought and believed

identically on everything – almost. In the end, he politely bade farewell after I said that I didn't use the King James Bible exclusively. I still prefer my German Bible and when I tell some people that, they ask if it was translated from the King James Version!

On another occasion, I was approached by a young man on the street who began to explain how I could become a Christian. I said that I was already a Christian, but he countered by saying, "Many people think they are Christians because they belong to a church or have been baptized..." I agreed but tried to explain that I had accepted Christ. To this, he argued, "Accepting Christ is more than participating in mass." By now, I was a little frustrated and said I believed the Bible to be God's Word. He then asked if I was a Jehovah's Witness!

As ridiculous as this sounds, I must commend that young man for his efforts even if he did make mistakes. Many Christians, like the Pharisees who lived in Israel 2000 years ago, claim to have superior theology, but they show little concern for the salvation of those who, according to their own theology, will spend eternity in hell.

When a church holds a "revival," it is usually just that. "Revival meetings are designed to revive the backslidden and remind the forgetful. The target audience usually consists of people who have already heard the gospel and who were raised in a Christian church and home but, who due to wrong choices, became "prodigal sons and daughters." In a sense, our evangelistic activities are aimed at "us."

If you are internet literate, check out a hundred church websites and look for one that attempts to reach "them." Most are designed to appeal to their own members or at best to attract Christians who have moved into the neighborhood and are seeking a church home.

## ***Not Very Foreign Missions***

The average Christian has difficulty communicating the gospel to “them” – even to the people who live across the street. Sharing one’s faith with people of a different culture, race, nationality or religious background is too much to expect, so that task is relegated to “foreign missionaries.”

Unfortunately, 90% of “foreign” missionaries serve on “Christian” turf, in so-called “Christian” nations. So people who really are foreign to the gospel seldom have the chance to hear it.

## CHAPTER 19

### PERFECTION

God created man in his own image and he wants us to be like himself. Jesus said, *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect* (Matthew 5:46).

That is, of course, a tall order that none of us can fill. All sin displeases God and though he warns us of the consequences, we often fail to listen. We are all sinners, but this in no way makes sin normal or “allowable!”

God is 100% intolerant of sin, so what does he do about it? Ignore it? Tolerate us? Punish us? Destroy us? Or does he mark on a curve?

In the case of the woman caught in adultery, the Pharisees disagreed on the severity of the woman’s punishment, but both sides felt that **THEY** were competent to mete out judgment. The lesser sinner excommunicates, beats or stones the greater offender!

Whatever Jesus wrote in the dirt caused them to drop their stones and leave the scene, but Jesus could have and should have stoned them all! Why didn’t he? Was he in effect saying that their acts were not so bad after all? Absolutely not!

Few Christians today would demand the death penalty for adultery, and even fewer would show kindness and understanding (as Jesus did) to a woman who had gone through five husbands and was living out of wedlock with a sixth (John 4:1-26). We simply tolerate or look the other way, as did the Levite and the Priest in the parable of “the good Samaritan.”

## ***God Desires Repentance***

Jesus was different because he desired and still seeks a repentant spirit and wants to make us into new creatures. Whether dealing with an aspiring young religious leader named Nicodemus or a convicted criminal fastened to his cross, Jesus had and still has one desire for all. He seeks repentant and broken hearts and gives new life in return. Just as the doctor's job is healing the sick and not punishing them, Jesus is in the business of forgiving and not judging.

## ***We Too Should Forgive***

When Peter asked if he should forgive his neighbor seven times, Jesus suggested multiplying that number by seven or even seventy. In the so-called "Lord's Prayer," we ask God to forgive us just like we forgive each other. Do we really forgive those who "trespass against us?" And do we really want God to forgive us like we forgive them?

God sent his Son Jesus to pay the price for our sins, even for our evil thoughts. No sin is excluded from God's offer of forgiveness. Not even adultery, divorce or murder! For those of us who repent and give ourselves to God, allowing him to transform us into images of himself, there is forgiveness. We have fellowship with Jesus and are adopted into the family of God. We can accept or reject his offer, but the price has been paid for our salvation.

## ***Forgiveness and Consequences***

Forgiveness can and should always be granted repentant souls, but the consequences of sin are a different matter altogether. If you cut the rotten part out of an apple, the rest may be edible but the apple is no longer complete. Sin can be instantly forgiven, but the wounds take longer

to heal and some scars or consequences may remain for a lifetime.

Logic and observation would teach us that neither punishment nor forgiveness eliminates all consequences of sin. The innocent victims of drunken drivers sometimes face dire life-long consequences while the guilty person may remain unscathed. We scream that this is unfair, but it is a fact of life. Even when the guilty party suffers consequences, they are seldom in relation to the offence.

God forgives our sin and in some cases there may be no further consequences, but in other situations these may be quite severe. King David was a man after God's own heart, but he was not without sin. God forgave him when he repented of the affair he had with Bathsheba, but his child still died and there were dire consequences of his failure in his family and kingdom.

There are circumstances beyond our control which have negative consequences for us. People are born with physical handicaps or become crippled by disease. Others can't play pro basketball because of their small stature. In such cases, we attempt to be helpful and sympathetic. We give impaired persons preference in hiring practices.

When problems are the direct consequence of sin, our reaction may be varied. An ex-bank robber who serves his sentence, is converted and receives a theological education could make a good pastor. But a pastor who steals the church's money to feed slot machines in a casino, or who has an affair with the church organist, should be dismissed even if he asks forgiveness. He has disqualified himself for the pastorate. Nor would a person convicted of child molestation be hired as a school teacher, even after he has served his sentence. I can give Bible verses to support my position, but plain logic should suffice.

## ***The Perfect Counterfeit is Still Counterfeit***

I worked three years in an art gallery and was fascinated with the representations of Jesus in the collection. Most masters of the middle ages presented Christ with feminine characteristics. Peter Paul Rubens gave him a nearly life-like muscular body, but it was nailed to a cross. Nearly all painters depicted Jesus Christ as either a helpless baby in his mother's protecting arms or as a lifeless, mutilated corpse. These paintings were typical of the period and they matched the prevailing teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. The Bible was available to only a select group of educated persons who knew Latin, Greek or Hebrew, so the common people logically believed these to be true depictions of the Christ.

Similarly, the Pharisees painted such a distorted picture of the promised Messiah that they themselves could not recognize him when he arrived. Distorted pictures of Jesus Christ are still being proclaimed from many pulpits.

When Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom, he painted an accurate picture of his heavenly Father. He made sin out to be what it is in God's sight – intolerable! And he also made it clear what God expects of us – perfection! But he didn't stop there. He presented him as a God of love and mercy who desires man's salvation and not his destruction. He preached that the kingdom of God was attainable through faith if man would only repent and believe.

## ***Our Dilemma***

The story of Gamaliel is important today because his dilemma is ours. The religious leaders of his day were hopelessly ensnarled in theological debates which, humanly speaking, were irresolvable. The Sadducees were materialistic liberals and the Pharisees divided into two

warring factions, neither of which showed love and mercy to repentant sinners. The Shammite perfectionists demanded judgment while the Hillites argued for tolerance. The result was confusion, division and chaos.

As was shown in the previous chapter, our 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity is also a mess. There are churches that emphasize adherence to the truth, churches which stress relationships and churches which simply maintain tradition. Adherents of all these groups more or less fulfill their obligations to their church and go about life like any person of the world. Fortunately, there is a fourth group in Christianity, which gives me hope for our lost world. I realize that there is some overlapping, but I would describe these four typical classifications of Christianity as follows:

1. One segment of Christianity seeks to unite all “in the Spirit” – with little emphasis on the truth of God’s Word. In these churches, it matters little what or how you believe or live as long as you belong and “get the Spirit.” These “feel good” churches place much emphasis on group activities and music. Solidarity and tolerance are all-important. Anything that distracts from these is unwelcome.
2. Another part of American Christianity places a strong emphasis on proclaiming the truth. These churches generally have one dominant leader (usually the pastor) and a small, exclusive “insider circle” which supports him. There is little room for disagreement and the normal manner of dealing with differences is separation. These churches are careful to distance themselves from other churches and organizations which hold slightly differing views.

3. The third major classification of Christians in America is composed of people who hold traditions, customs and liturgical rites to be most important. Truth and relationships have more to do with history and genealogies than faith. It is difficult for outsiders to feel accepted in these churches, so membership is primarily inherited.
  
4. Fortunately, there are Christians who are sincere followers of Christ and their churches reflect this humble attitude. The primary objective is to maintain a close personal relationship with God and to do his will. In doing so, they devote equal attention to the diligent study of God's Word and to nurturing healthy personal relationships with fellow believers. Such churches are warm and hospitable but not theologically wishy-washy. Most members are involved in some kind of ministry. The church faithfully teaches God's Word and the believers maintain a clear Christian testimony in the surrounding community.

### ***The Dangers of Perfectionism***

When seeking spiritual perfection, we can easily become proud and judgmental. When we seek truth, we will inevitably discover error, and it is usually found in those closest to us!

Christians who seek to live according to God's expectations and to do his will have to deal with differences more often than those who don't take their faith seriously or who simply tolerate.

Just as there is no perfect marriage relationship, neither is there perfect agreement between Christians this side of heaven. Contrary to popular opinion, harmonious and successful relationships are not a byproduct of

agreement, but they develop and are enhanced through dealing with differences. Perfectionists tend to separate themselves from those who think differently, while the “tolerators” are not overly concerned about what is right or maintaining responsible relationships. Because they don’t feel bound to those who differ, they don’t care and don’t grow in their faith. Committed Christians, like committed married couples, must work hard at overcoming differences and keeping a harmonious relationship.

## CHAPTER 20

### THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The Lord's teaching which has become known as the "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5-7) has been falsely understood and misinterpreted throughout church history and it is not properly understood by many Christians today. Yet the truths expressed in this sermon are of utmost importance, and understanding them would have far-reaching positive effects on each of us and society in general.

The Jews were looking for a Messiah who would set up his kingdom here on earth. They had experienced enough injustice and were fed up with high taxation. Jesus soon showed qualities the people were looking for in a Messiah. Unlike the Pharisees and other leading Jews, he related to the common man. His teachings were down to earth and illustrated with parables that helped the people to understand. He also healed the sick and handicapped. The populace wanted him to be their Messiah and to set up his kingdom here on earth.

The Jewish leaders were fearful that Jesus might do exactly that. So they hated him and tried their best to trip him up in his speech and deeds.

Jesus spent much time talking about the kingdom of God, and this confused and confounded both the Pharisees and the common people.

Jesus begins his sermon on the mount (verses 3-12) with a pronouncement of "blessing" (Greek= happiness) on people who try to live right and get a bad rap for their efforts. The kind of situations he describes cause people to ask, "Why does God allow this to happen?" Life makes

little sense and there seems to be no justice whatsoever. In verse 12, he tells those poor wretched souls who have tried their best to serve and obey God and to help others, and whose only reward for their effort is being maligned, slandered and persecuted, “Be happy – very happy!” He adds that many Old Testament prophets had the same experience, but he also makes another very important statement.

### ***Your Reward is in Heaven***

Jesus reminds his followers not to expect proper treatment from this world. Life is just not fair, and the righteous should not expect their rewards here on earth.

This was a new concept to many Jews. In the Old Testament, man was promised material blessings for faithfulness to God. Peace, prosperity and an abundant harvest were the rewards of the righteous. The message was clear; “Do right and I will bless. The enemy will be defeated, the womb will be fruitful and long life is guaranteed.” After six days of work, followed a day of rest. The Lord’s tenth was calculated after the harvest had been measured and weighed.

In the New Testament, things changed dramatically and Jesus paved the way for these changes in his Sermon on the Mount.

Christians now meet on the first day of the week and they are to give all to God, not just a tenth. We have become family, co-workers, partners and co-heirs. We serve out of thankful hearts and in love for our Savior. *All things are yours; ye are Christ’s and Christ is God’s* (I Corinthians 3:22).

Jesus tells us not to worry about temporal things because God will care for us. He provides for flowers and birds, feeding them and clothing them in splendor, but we are much more valuable to him than these. The Lord

promises to provide our needs in this life, but no more. We are not promised earthly rewards for faithfulness, but are rather told to expect persecution and suffering in this life. Our reward is in heaven.

Jesus didn't give his life for things; he died for people. He didn't endure the sufferings of the cross to save the environment. God cares for plants and animals, but he died for people – even those who mocked, scourged and crucified him. Nor did he die for our earthly bodies. He calls us to present these to him as a sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2). We are not bodies that contain souls, but souls with temporary bodies and a heavenly mission.

Jesus placed little value on the things we hold to be important. In the Sermon on the Mount, he told his followers, “If a man takes your coat, give him the shirt off your back!” “If someone slaps your face, turn the other cheek!” In one of his many parables, workers who labored all day received the same pay as those who worked an hour (Matthew 20:11). A servant who works hard all day should expect no remuneration for his effort. He has only done what he is supposed to do (Luke 17:10).

Jesus had no bed where he could rest his head. When taxes were due, he sent Peter to catch a fish with money in its mouth (Matthew 17:27). When he needed a donkey or a room to celebrate the last supper with his disciples, he simply conscripted it (Matthew 21:3). Soldiers tossed lots for his cloak and he was buried in a borrowed tomb. The Pharisees and Sadducees accused Jesus of doing good on the Sabbath, but they couldn't accuse him of trying to get rich.

Jesus often compared the kingdom of heaven with temporal things that men seek and value. Even silver and gold pale in comparison to heavenly things.

The story is told of a wealthy man who was instructed to prepare for death. The man begged with tears

to be able to take his money along to heaven, but God said this was against the rules. He continued to beg and plead until God finally conceded, "You are allowed one suitcase." The man sold all that he had and purchased gold bars. When he appeared before the pearly gates, tired and sweating profusely, St. Peter looked at the suitcase and said he was not allowed to bring anything with him. The man replied that God had given him permission to bring one suitcase. Peter checked and found that this was true. He then demanded that the suitcase be opened for inspection. When he saw the gold, he responded with a quizzical look on his face, "You brought pavement?"

As one southern gospel song goes, "What on earth are you living for? There's nothing here worth missing heaven for." God created this old world in six days. Although man has neglected and abused God's creation for millenniums, it can still be breathtakingly beautiful! Now consider that 2000 years ago, Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you." What must that be like after two thousand years in the making? And no sin will ever enter that wonderful place!

In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus encourages his listeners not to give up when things are not going as they had hoped. Don't let your salt get diluted so that it loses potency; stay salty! Keep your light shining and don't hide it under a basket! Don't expect life to offer you a bed of roses. Men won't recognize and praise you, but you should live so they will give glory to God in heaven!

Do you get the point? Heaven is better and that is where we are headed if we are his followers. Down here we serve and obey and suffer, but in heaven things are much different. The Christian's reward is in heaven.

## ***Ye Have Heard it Said...***

From chapter 5:17 through 6:18, Jesus repeatedly says, “Ye have heard it said...” He is, of course, referring to the Old Testament prophets, but even more so, to that which their own Rabbis taught.

Of all the religious groups in Israel, the Pharisees were the undisputed spiritual motor, but they were divided. The Shammite Pharisees were harsh and legalistic while the Hillite Pharisees showed themselves to be a bit more tolerant. Because it was virtually impossible for anyone to obey the law as preached by the Shammite Rabbis, most of the common people leaned towards Hillite teachings. But even their rules seemed impossible to obey.

I am reminded of our Roman Catholic friends in Austria who picture God as being a very austere and strict judge, so they go to Mary with their spiritual and physical needs. They feel that she is more understanding and will intercede for them. But even Mary is difficult to please. The church has high expectations and makes demands which only a few manage to fulfill. It may at first seem to be an easier way to God, but even the most devout Catholics expect to go through purgatory before they reach heaven. The gospel of Jesus is different.

## ***But I Say Unto You...***

It is what Jesus now says that comes as a surprise to most. The Jews would have expected him to side with one of the pharisaic schools or to offer an easier way to heaven. Instead, he declares that the others make it too easy to please God!

From this point on, his sermon is a series of consistent, logical arguments which have to do with God’s law. His message comes across loud and clear, but many find it too harsh and seek to discover “what he

really meant” and to spiritualize his words. There is no covert message in the sermon on the mount. Jesus was simply saying that If God is perfect, then He would not be happy with anything less than perfection in us. If you think you are pretty good because you haven’t committed adultery, think again! You lust and become an adulterer. You covet another’s possessions and become a thief. You hate and become a murderer! Think the thought; you are guilty of the sin!

A man is not a thief because he steals, but he steals because he is a thief at heart. He does not become a murderer after killing someone, but he kills because he hates. He commits adultery because he is lustful.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus depicts the seemingly impossible predicament in which man finds himself. The wicked are of course condemned, but even those who seek to live right and please God face humanly impossible expectations. Unfortunately, many Christians fail to comprehend what Jesus is teaching in this sermon.

### ***Sin is Bad!***

Over and over, Jesus hammered this lesson home, but even his disciples had difficulty understanding. Jesus tells us that if our hand, foot or eye causes us to sin, we are better off without them (Matthew 5:29-30). In Mark 9, Jesus said that it would be better to have a millstone hung around our neck and to be cast into the sea than to be guilty of causing offense to someone who believes in him. Jesus healed a man at the pool of Bethesda who had been lame for 38 long years. When he later saw him in the temple, Jesus said, *Go and sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee* (John 5:1-14).

What is the lesson Jesus is trying to teach us? It should be quite obvious by now, yet many Christians miss the point. Being physically impaired for a lifetime is

better than having to pay the consequences of sin for eternity. Sin is bad, really bad. Sin is deadly and humanly impossible to deal with. If we punish a sinner, we become sinners ourselves. All our good deeds cannot wipe out or pay for the smallest sin. We should ALWAYS do right – every second of our lives. We should NEVER do wrong – NEVER – EVER! ALL have sinned and fallen short of God’s high expectations. And there is NOTHING we can do about it!

If you want to live by the law, your chances of survival are zero! God is perfect and he demands perfection in us (Matthew 5:48).

But that is the law and not the gospel. The Sermon on the Mount prepares us for the gospel, God’s good news for man. Jesus sent his disciples out to preach the gospel and not to pronounce judgment on sinners or bless the good guys. The gospel begins with the promise that God loves us (John 3:16).

## ***God Loves Us***

We can never really appreciate the good news – the gospel that God loves us, until we have recognized sin for what it is. God hates sin and MUST punish sinners.

God also gave us the law, which is good. Without the law, we would not realize how bad sin is, but we don’t earn God’s love by keeping the law. Unfortunately, there are many who still think they can earn enough “brownie points” by obeying laws and doing good works. They try to impress God and believe that if they try hard enough, he will love them. But God loved us while we were still sinners – enough to die for us (Romans 5:8)! He wants to give us his best. All our own goodness is like filthy rags in God’s sight (Isaiah 64:6). Certainly God delights in obedience, but it is an open affront to him if we are doing it to earn his love and favor! God loves us!

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians about many wonderful spiritual gifts and concluded with the words, *yet shew I unto you a more excellent way* (I Corinthians 12). Then follows his classical chapter on love. This passage is often read at weddings, but it really has to do with spiritual matters.

I am going to paraphrase I Corinthians 13 and hope my readers will realize that these are my words and not God's. Still, it may be helpful in understanding this passage.

*If I speak eloquently, impressing people with my brilliant command of the language, but I do not speak the truth in love, I am like wind chimes, blowing in the wind.*

*If I have great understanding and knowledge, can explain difficult theological concepts and have been entrusted with great responsibility and authority; but I don't carry out my responsibilities in sacrificial love, I am a mere bubble that can burst at any moment.*

*If I am extremely benevolent and give all that I have to charity; if I make great personal sacrifices and endure much criticism; but not out of love for God and the people he died for; but rather to build a monument to myself; it will profit no one, least of all myself.*

*True sacrificial love is willing to suffer patiently, is polite and kind, doesn't envy those who receive greater honor or who have it better. Godly love is not proud or conceited, doesn't get pushy or greedy, is not easily upset or offended, assumes no evil intent on the part of others, finds no enjoyment in evil, but takes pleasure in the truth. Godly, selfless love cares, believes, hopes and endures.*

*And unlike the great preachers, priests, theologians and prophets, Godly love cannot fail. Even knowledge will ultimately fail, but not Godly love.*

*For the present time, our knowledge and spiritual insight is imperfect and incomplete. We are still learning, but there is coming a day, when we will know perfectly and believe perfectly.*

*When I was a child, I talked, thought and acted like a child, but as I matured and became a man, I began to seek to please God rather than draw attention to myself.*

*In this life, there is much I don't understand, but when I meet my Savior face to face, I will know and understand just as God knows and understands me.*

*In the meanwhile, we continue to believe, hope and love, with the special emphasis on Godly love.*

Love is better! God loves us and he wants us to simply love him in return.

### ***We Should Love Each Other***

There is a lot of talk about love, but in most cases, it is love of self - whatever makes us feel good. Jesus said that we should love each other just like he loved us. Just in case we forgot, he described that love in the Sermon on the Mount: *Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48)*

## *The Golden Rule*

A story in the Babylonian Talmud reports that a certain Gentile came before Shammai and said, “I will become a proselyte if you can teach me the whole Torah while I’m standing on one foot.” Shammai knocked him down with the builder’s rule in his hand. The same stranger came before Hillel and repeated his statement. Hillel told him, “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn it!” (Shab. 31a). The man became a proselyte and Hillel’s words became widely known as the “Golden Rule.”

Do these words sound familiar? In Mark 12, we find a discourse between Jesus and a scribe, probably of Hillel’s school:

*And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all? And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.*

The Jews accredited the “golden rule” to Hillel and modern Christians think it originated with Jesus. But both our Lord and Hillel were quoting an obscure verse hidden away in Leviticus 19. It is sandwiched between warnings not to curse the deaf, trip the blind or to gossip. The chapter includes rules for sowing seed, sewing clothes and

trimming the beard and, if you look closely, you also find the admonishment to love your neighbor as yourself.

It is interesting to note that Hillel's Golden Rule was in the negative form, "Do not do unto another that which you would not want done to you." Jesus said, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," which reflects the original text in Leviticus 19.

Hillel recognized brotherly love as a fundamental principle of Jewish moral law. Rabbi Hillel's emphasis on brotherly love motivated several well-known European theologians of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to contend that Jesus was a follower of Hillel's teachings. But Jesus is actually reprimanding the Pharisees in this passage. He reminded them that there was a greater commandment, namely to love God first and foremost. Love of one's neighbor (personal relationships) must be transcended by love for God (our main objective).

James called the golden rule the "royal law" and declared that it is basically a good rule, but then revealed the down side: *But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin* (James 2::8. 9). The Apostle Paul taught similarly in Galatians 5:14-16, *For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another. This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.* Loving your neighbor as self is a fleshly thing, but we are to love each other with a godly love.

So we see that the Golden Rule has its problems. We read about distraught mothers who kill their own children before committing suicide. They love their children as themselves. A drug addict once told me that he would share his last fix of heroin with a friend in need. Many marriages are dissolved on grounds of incompatibility even though both partners attempt to live by the golden

rule. They love each other as they love themselves. You have perhaps heard the saying, “Marriage is a matter of give and take.” If it is only that, it may be doomed. A healthy marriage involves giving and receiving, but never “taking.” If one partner gives more than the other, there may be problems, but *love covers a multitude of sins* (I Peter 4:8; Proverbs 10:12). *Agape* love gives, expecting nothing in return.

In John 13:34, Jesus gave the “golden rule” a powerful new twist: *A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.* The “golden rule” was superseded by the “new commandment” or the “law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

We have seen that the Golden Rule has certain limitations, but the “new commandment” or the “law of Christ” gives mankind an entirely new precedent. And our Lord is absolutely consequent in his teaching, calling his disciples to follow that grand example: *Just as the father hath sent me, so send I you* (John 20:21).

### ***A Sixth Rule of Logical Argumentation***

I named five rules of logical argumentation in Chapter 18, but here is the sixth rule which I promised to share with you. It is at the very least the fulfillment of the “golden rule,” but optimally, it is keeping the “New Commandment” or “Law of Christ.”

According to the “golden rule,” logic demands that all participants in a debate be considered equal. But the “new commandment” or “law of Christ” goes one step further and gives the other party preference.

*Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love [agape], being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem the other better than*

*themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Philippians 2:2-8).*

Even as Christ “humbled himself,” so we are to humble ourselves – to make personal sacrifices in reaching out to each other, our spouse, our neighbors and even those who persecute us (Matthew 5:11 and 43; Romans 12:14).

We are living in an age which is characterized by a rule called “tolerance,” which not only disregards the “Law of Christ,” but the first commandment and the golden rule as well. I will have more to say about this subject in Chapter 22.

## CHAPTER 21

### HYPOCRISY

The Pharisees were obsessed with meeting each other's approval, yet they claimed to obey God. Every detail of life from dress codes and carefully formulated prayers to the painstaking rituals of hand-washing and tithing, was dictated by group expectations. They sincerely believed that by fulfilling these expectations, they were being righteous and godly, but Jesus called them "hypocrites."

#### *What is a hypocrite?*

A hypocrite is basically someone who uses double standards. Some merchants in the market places secretly kept two sets of weights for their scales: one set for purchases and another for sales. The Bible says that keeping two sets of weights is anathema to God (Deuteronomy 25:14-16; Proverbs 20:10-14).

This is precisely what the Pharisees did in the spiritual realm. They had one set of rules for others and another set for themselves. Jesus told his disciples, *All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not* (Matthew 23:3).

I once resorted to using double standards myself. In the Austrian Bible Institute, several students constantly fought over control of the thermostat. For some it was too warm while others thought it was too cold. I threatened to remove the thermostat and give each student an adjustable thermometer, but they, of course, rejected that idea. The battle of the thermostat continued. I finally disconnected it and installed another thermostat in a hidden place which

only I knew about. They kept changing the fake thermostat while I controlled the real thing.

We can laugh about this, but hypocrisy is seldom funny. The hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees evoked the harshest words of condemnation ever uttered by our Lord. Realizing that most readers would not take the trouble to look up this passage, I will give it here.

*Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, and love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi. But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted. But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye*

*compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves. Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein. And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have*

*been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord (Matthew 23).*

### ***Gamaliel, the Chief Hypocrite***

I realize that I am putting my hand into the fire by drawing this conclusion, but if Gamaliel was the most prominent Pharisee, he was also the chief hypocrite!

Most Jews and many evangelical Christians think quite highly of Gamaliel. I have heard sermons preached on his words to the Sanhedrin which practically eulogized him. Certainly, he exemplified many good traits, was knowledgeable and gifted. We can learn from anyone; even from fools and atheists, but it is not a good idea to make them our teachers and role models.

I attended a conference of Christian workers during which the main speaker spent several days teaching

biblical principles of leadership based on Jethro's advice to Moses. I had difficulty following his discourses even though he made some good points.

Jethro was a Midianite priest and the Midianites were traditional enemies of Israel who served other gods. Jethro arrived in the Israelite camp in Exodus 18:5, came to the conclusion that Jehovah was greater than other gods in verse 11 and on the following day, he gave Moses advice on how to rule Israel. Jethro then returned to his own land and his own gods. Not long afterwards, Moses complained to God about having to carry the responsibility for Israel all alone. All alone? What happened to Jethro's advice? God then commanded Moses to select 70 men and bring them to the tabernacle. We find an interesting statement in Numbers 11:25, *God took of the spirit that was upon him [Moses], and gave it unto the seventy elders.* In my opinion, Numbers 11 would have served as a better text than Exodus 18 for teaching lessons on leadership.

Gamaliel was born into a well-known and respected family of Rabbis. His rich heritage and the expectations placed upon him must have been difficult to bear even as a child, but he lived up to those expectations and became highly recognized and admired by both the Jewish people and his peers. The recognition and approval of others kept him striving and he gradually became addicted to it. Like politicians whose actions are governed by public opinion polls, Gamaliel's words and actions were carefully weighed and selected according to the approval ratings of his peers. The quest for truth gradually faded into oblivion until it became of little importance.

Proverbs 3:3-4 reads, *Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart: So shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man.* According to

Luke 2:52, *Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.* By attempting to please God, we may at times please men, but attempting to please both God and man never works.

By the time Gamaliel is introduced to us in the New Testament, much has transpired which should have caused him to recognize Jesus as the promised Christ. In fact, he comes close to such a recognition when he says, *But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God* (Acts 5:39). This bold statement is similar to the words of the Apostles a few verses earlier, who said, “We ought to obey God rather than men.”

In Matthew 22 and Mark 12, Pharisees, Herodians and Sadducees attempted to trick Jesus with cleverly conceived questions, but Jesus silenced them all with his wisdom. If the intent of their questioning had been getting intelligent answers or if they had wanted to know if Jesus was what he claimed to be, that would have been legitimate. But they were not interested in truth and only wanted to trick him into making a mistake.

Generally, the Pharisees were not interested in truth. Jesus called them hypocrites.

Each of us must decide between serving God or man. Seeking approval of men always leads to a schism between us and God. Gamaliel was certainly serious about serving God, but his longing for personal recognition kept him from accepting the truth as embodied in the work, teaching and person of Jesus, who said, *I am the way, the truth and the life; no man cometh to the father, but through me.*

Gamaliel tried gallantly to live according to his conscience. Although conscience is a wonderful invention of our Creator, it is not always reliable. The Bible speaks of people whose conscience has been *seared as with a hot*

*iron.* Exposure to erroneous concepts and teachings affects the conscience just as truth does. Our conscience can be compared to a scales. It weighs whatever is placed on it, but we choose the weights and discern the result. When we choose to use two sets of weights, we become hypocrites.

## CHAPTER 22

### TRUTH AND TOLERANCE

Gamaliel has been recognized as a champion of both truth and tolerance, and it would therefore be appropriate to devote a chapter to this subject.

#### *What is Truth?*

Pilate asked this question of Jesus shortly before he was crucified, but it has been the key question posed by man from the beginning of recorded history. Pilate was not the only person of his time who asked that question. The Greek thinkers, called Skeptics, Stoics, Epicureans, Sophists and Cynics were heavily engaged in the quest for truth. Most of us have read some of the works of Aristotle and Plato in school.

For centuries, representatives of all races, nationalities, religions and political bodies agreed upon the basic premise that there were two opposing poles by which all actions and thoughts may be judged. These were known as “right and wrong” or “truth and error.”

The quest for truth has been the cornerstone of science, the basis of education and the foundation of culture throughout history. Neither science, education, culture nor religion is ever perfected in this life. We continue to learn until death. Anyone who receives a diploma and thinks he is educated has been badly deceived. A scientist who retires after making a great discovery ceases to be a scientist. Anyone who shies from theological discussions by claiming, “I have my religion“ lays bare his own spiritual depravity.

Men have fought wars over the various definitions and interpretations of truth and over consequences for those who disregard it. Men have attempted to relativize, manipulate, cheat and ignore truth; but they have historically agreed that truth and error existed and that everything could be judged upon the basis of established truth. This was the case when Adam and Eve ate from “the tree of knowledge of good and evil” and it didn’t change until recently.

Modern humanistic thought has paved the way for a total departure from traditional rationality. Diametrically opposing and conflicting arguments or actions are now experiencing a strange romance. Truth and error are found in warm embrace. Millions of people the world over prefer atheistic philosophical thought to the traditional Judeo Christian code of ethics which nearly all the civilized world had come to acknowledge.

The absolute authority of truth no longer remains unchallenged. Unproven theories and even contradictory statements are accepted as “science,” and the historic thesis/antithesis method of solving differences has been discarded like a worn-out pair of shoes. The basis for researching the unknown has always been that which could be tested and proven (truth or fact), but today, men make unproven postulates and often give pure speculation precedence over scientific facts. They can even get irate when someone dares to challenge their claims or question the methodology used in reaching conclusions. To them, it is not truth which is important, but tolerance for other positions, opinions and feelings.

Champions of this new type of thinking claim that the pursuance of truth has only led to hatred, fighting, wars and divisiveness. They believe that discarding the truth will usher in an age of peace and unity. Since church and religion are traditionally considered to be interpreters and

protectorates of truth, these institutions have also fallen into disrepute. I can understand that some would reject the interpretations of truth given by certain religious bodies, but to deny the very existence of truth is insane.

In place of truth, man has inserted a thing he calls “tolerance.”

### ***What is Tolerance?***

The traditional meaning of the word *tolerance* would be “allowance for error” or “permitted departure from a given norm.” In industry, a norm is ascertained and then measurable tolerances are specified for permissible aberration. This is still the case in manufacturing, economics and science. Tolerant allowances are hardly measurable today.

Allow me to illustrate the traditional meaning of the word “tolerance,” using a personal experience.

### ***My First Car***

Before I was old enough to obtain a driver’s license, I purchased my first car. It was a 1924 Model “T” Ford. I determined to restore the 30-year-old car to its original condition and began with the motor. My father had owned several Model “T”s and gave me valuable tips. He showed me how to assess the condition of the four-cylinder engine as follows:

“First, you take off the cylinder head and crank the motor until a cylinder is at the top. With your index finger, try to wiggle the cylinder. If it moves a lot, you may have to add sleeves and install new pistons. If it only shows a little bit of play, you can get away with new piston rings.”

Fortunately, my car only needed rings, but this illustrates the allowed tolerances in the twenties. How things have changed since then!

Two years later, I purchased a 1946 Ford convertible. I had to buy feeler gauges before “souping up” its V-8 engine. Tolerances had changed considerably between 1924 and 1946, yet I was still able to rebuild the engine with normal tools in our own garage. Today, no one would attempt to adjust their own carburetor! Most tolerance allowances are not measurable without special computerized equipment.

Tolerance is still defined in this manner in most situations. If the police department declares that motorists will not be ticketed for going five mph over the speed limit, it is assumed that there is a posted speed limit. Without a speed limit, a five mph toleration would be meaningless. If your bank tells you that you should allow them a 1% margin of error, you would change banks, but if they request toleration of error with no limitations, we would report it to the police!

### ***One Exception***

When applied to morals, ethics and religion, many people have decided to preach tolerance without specifying a norm. The goal is not to establish a norm with certain allowances for error, but rather to totally eliminate values. When we hear the word *tolerance* today, people think immediately of permissiveness. According to tolerance, everyone should be allowed to think and do as he or she pleases. “Live and let live!” Toleration requires a person to ignore situations that would have been inconceivable a few decades ago. Tolerance tolerates everything but truth. In fact, truth is presented as the greatest enemy of tolerance – because truth is intolerant! Tolerance has always depended on an absolute, a normal condition or standard. But this radical new definition of tolerance does not need a norm or standard. Tolerance is the norm!

After a lengthy and gruesome tour of the former Nazi concentration camp, Mauthausen, our tour guide said, “What we need to learn from all we have seen today is to practice tolerance.” He obviously did not mean that we should show tolerance for the atrocities committed in that death camp, but it serves to illustrate how senseless tolerance can be without an established norm or standard.

### ***Gamaliel’s Tolerance***

The original intent of the Pharisees was quite noble, in that they attempted to establish truth in order to obey it. But even as Jesus demonstrated in the Sermon on the Mount, neither the Pharisees nor anyone else was capable of keeping the law in its entirety. Some of the recorded discourses of the Sanhedrin show their frustrations with this fact. In Chapter 14, I mentioned an account in which Hillel presented a complicated resolution to conflicting Sabbath and Passover regulations where these fell on the same day.

The Pharisees developed a prescribed ritual for washing hands that was extremely complicated, but they mastered the art and looked down on those who didn’t follow their examples.

According to mosaic law, the sacrificial lamb was to be a lamb without spot or blemish, but few such animals existed. The Pharisees had to invent measuring devices to determine the permissible departure from perfection that would be allowed. So the Pharisees went on and developed many rules and interpretations which they claimed were from God.

Although Gamaliel’s grandfather was known for tolerance, it was Gamaliel who perfected the idea of toleration. Gamaliel was an uncontested leader among the Jews, and members of both the Shammite and Hillite schools respected his opinions. Even the Sadducees and

chief priests were inclined to honor Gamaliel's diplomatic efforts to resolve difficult issues brought before the Sanhedrin. Gamaliel interpreted scriptures by applying the golden rule. Today we would say he took a tolerant stance in judicial matters.

### ***Shammite Legalism***

As we have already seen, the Shammite school of pharisaical thought took a hard line approach to interpretation of scripture. Most Jews leaned toward Hillelite teachings, but anyone serious about obeying God's Word would have been at least a little sympathetic to the Shammite cause. Saul of Tarsus was such a person.

### ***Saul, the Defector***

*Saul breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2).*

It is difficult to recognize the influence of Hillel and Gamaliel in Saul's life shortly before his conversion on the road to Damascus. Where was tolerance? How could the persecution of Christians be justified? These people were law-abiding citizens whose only "crime" was claiming that Jesus had been raised from the dead. What happened to the Golden Rule?

Apparently Saul had recognized that the rapidly growing Christian movement would soon dominate the religious scene in Israel. In his mind, it was bad enough to be ruled by the Romans and to have so many Jewish factions vying for power and control of the Jews and the temple. The new Christian sect was growing by leaps and

bounds. The apostles took their God-given mission to preach the gospel and make disciples seriously. Not only the common people, but Jewish priests, educated and wealthy citizens were embracing the new Christian teachings.

Saul ruled out tolerance as a viable method of dealing with this explosive situation. He became a defector from the Hillite school and began to act more like a disciple of Shammai. We don't know if there was any official transfer of allegiance, but his activities show a definite shift from the tolerant position of the Hillite school.

## CHAPTER 23

### GRACE AND TRUTH

*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.... For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.*

John 1:14-17

As we have already seen, God demands absolute obedience to His commands and allows no room for tolerance! Nor can he, for he is perfect. But fortunately for us, God is also love. He loves us so much, that he sent his Son to die for us in order that we might be forgiven and be freed from darkness to walk in the light. That is why the Bible declares that Jesus is full of grace and truth. Grace is God's answer to man's transgression of the truth. If we accept God's gift of love, we can enter into the wonderful realm of grace and truth.

The truth is intolerant, but truth does not stand alone. Since Calvary, grace and truth are united in one person: Jesus Christ. God can not tolerate evil and disobedience, but he loves all men and women. God's love alone was not enough to rescue us from His judgment. God **MUST** judge every departure from truth, and He did just that! Jesus Christ, God's Son, paid for our sin with his own life.

The central theme of the New Testament is forgiveness and that is what separates Christianity from all other religions. Jesus lived three intensive years with 12 men who didn't meet God's standards. Jesus didn't tolerate them; he loved them and forgave them. He would

have forgiven Judas had he asked. But Judas went instead to a priest and confessed his sin. He even offered money in hopes of undoing his sin. There is nothing we can do to pay for our sins to make them good. All that we are and have is a gift of God. We have earned nothing but judgment, so how could we do anything for our own salvation? But Jesus offers forgiveness to all who repent and believe. One of the criminals who was crucified with Christ repented and asked for salvation. He didn't get baptized or join a church, but he is in heaven because he went to the right person. Jesus is full of grace and truth.

In what we call "The Lord's Prayer" (actually given as an example for us), we are told to ask God to forgive us just as we forgive others.

We lived in a farming community in Austria where two families had lived for several generations. Members of these families seldom spoke to each other because of an incident which had taken place many years previously. They could not forgive each other, yet they went faithfully to church and prayed, "Forgive us our trespasses even as we forgive those that trespass against us."

Forgiveness is more than toleration. Tolerance doesn't love, and separated from the truth, it has no value whatsoever. Grace and truth are found only in Jesus.

Isaiah wrote of the coming Christ, *A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth* (Is. 42:3). Love is humble, caring and self sacrificing (I Corinthians 13). Jesus told his followers, *By this shall all men know that you are my disciples; if you have love one for another* (John. 13:35). He didn't say we should tolerate each other or that we had to agree. We are to love and forgive each other just as Christ forgave us.

## *Tolerance and Solidarity*

We hear these two terms repeatedly today. They are praised as the pillars of modern society, yet they are in reality incompatible. The idea is to stand together as a unit, while tolerating differences. But that is like putting cats and mice in the same cage. There is no such thing as tolerance without a value, norm or standard. In fact, the truth is the only reliable standard which can give solidarity.

The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar had a vision which is recorded in Daniel 2. He saw the giant image of a man, with a head of gold, breast of silver, thighs of bronze, legs of iron and finally, feet of iron mixed with clay. Like that mixture of iron and clay, solidarity and tolerance don't make a good foundation. The image of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream was crushed by a "rock not made with hands," and the mighty image not only fell, but it was ground to dust by the rock.

Jesus Christ founded his church on a rock that was not made with hands but on the Word of God – truth. The church will withstand all efforts of wicked men to destroy it: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no man comes to the Father except through me." That is a very dogmatic statement, but Jesus allowed no room for tolerance.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the most logical, dependable and reasonable answer to all of this world's needs and problems. The Bible is truth and I believe it. I don't believe the Bible because millions of others down through history have done so, although this is so. Nor do I believe the Bible because gifted and noble personages have convinced me of its value. I believe because I have come to know the author and found that He keeps His Word. His Word is truth!

Anyone who lives according to God's Word will have the same experience. That is not just my promise, but God's. One of my favorite verses from the Bible is found in John 7:17. Jesus was asked to prove that his words were from God. He answered by saying, "If any man will do his [God's] will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." If you are wondering what to believe, the key lies in the first part of this verse. If you are willing to DO what is right in God's eyes, you can recognize the truth. If you insist that there is no God or truth and that you yourself are the center of the universe around which everything revolves, you have the other option. Iron and clay.

Where is civilization headed? None of us knows the answer to that question, but we can all know where we are headed! Jesus is the way, the truth and the life; no man or woman can attain salvation and spend eternity with God except through faith in him who paid the price for our disobedience. He is full of grace and truth.

## CHAPTER 24

### GAMALIEL'S DEATH

According to Josephus, Gamaliel died eighteen years before the destruction of Jerusalem around the time of the Apostle Paul's shipwreck on the island of Malta (Acts 27-28). Gamaliel was buried with great honor. One of his pupils, Onkelos, author of the celebrated *Targum*, "raised to him such a funeral pile of rich materials as had never before been known except at the burial of a king." Astute Jews later called Gamaliel the "Beauty of the Law" and wrote, "Since Rabban Gamaliel the elder died, there has been no more reverence for the law, and purity and abstinence died out at the same time." (*Mishnah*, Sota ix.15)

A doubtful legend contends that Gamaliel became a Christian and was baptized by Peter while remaining a member of the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus, who was apparently a member of the Sanhedrin, and the wealthy Joseph of Arimathaea each declared themselves to be friends of Christ, but there is no evidence that Gamaliel accepted the messianic claims concerning Jesus. Jewish historians contend that he died a devout Pharisee in 52 AD. The Catholic Encyclopedia records that his body was discovered in the fifth century and is preserved at Pisa, in Italy.

#### ***Wait and See!***

When Gamaliel died, he was apparently still waiting for some additional compelling proof or evidence that Jesus was truly the Messiah. This man, who was most

familiar with the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming Messiah; who was personally involved in circumstances surrounding Christ's birth, ministry, death and resurrection; whose gifted student first defected from the Hillite traditions and began persecuting Christians, only to join with them – this man, Gamaliel, was still reluctant to believe. “Wait and see!” seems to have been Gamaliel's philosophy all his life (Acts 5:38-39).

There are times when we do well to wait and see before making a plunge into the unknown. Buying spontaneously or making snap judgments on important matters is not wise. But when faced with all the clear evidence on crucial issues, we need to make definite decisions and determine to stand by them unless we are proved wrong. Doing right does not come naturally, and we must solemnly resolve to discover what is right and do it no matter what the cost may be.

By the same token, no sin ever dies a natural death. We need to deal with wrong-doing in accordance with guidelines outlined in the Bible. The price we will pay for non-action is greater than any cost we might face attempting to deter, block or otherwise deal with evil.

What is your position regarding Jesus? Is “wait and see” your attitude? Even after 2000 years? Consider all that has happened since Gamaliel's time.

### ***Powerful Historical Evidence***

Although atheists have produced countless volumes of books in an attempt to refute or disprove the Bible, it continues to be not only a best-seller, but the widest read and most influential book of all time.

Another best-seller is the book *Ben Hur*, which was made into a movie. The author, Lew Wallace, had never taken much interest in religion, but after listening to the eloquent agnostic Robert Ingersoll deride religion during a

train ride to Chicago, he was motivated to do more study on his own. As a result, this Civil War General, Governor of New Mexico and U.S. Ambassador to Turkey became a best-selling author and proponent of the Bible.

Innumerable men have expended much energy - even their entire lives waging war against a God they claimed does not exist! During the seventies and eighties, I operated a print shop in Austria which produced Christian literature and Bible portions that were smuggled into communist countries of Eastern Europe. Bible smugglers were very inventive in getting this material to its destination. Until 1989, vehicles crossing the borders from Austria into Eastern Europe were thoroughly searched - not for weapons, but for Bibles! Communists were deathly afraid of this book which they claimed contained “fairy tales that only a fool would believe.”

The famous skeptic Voltaire (pen name for François Marie Arouet, 1694-1778) predicted that the Bible would become obsolete and only be found in museums after 100 years. Exactly one century later, the house in which he made that statement was the home of the British and Foreign Bible Society!

In the western hemisphere, most people celebrate the birth and resurrection of Jesus, even those who deny his deity. Around the world, time is counted forwards and backwards from the birth of Christ. The international symbol for a birth is a star (\*) and the symbol for death is a cross (†).

The most powerful radio station in South America was built by Red China to propagate its godless philosophy on that continent. Today, Christian groups broadcast Gospel programs over this station! The most powerful radio station in the world was built in Albania to spread Communist propaganda throughout Europe. Today, Trans World Radio and other Christian organizations

broadcast the Gospel over this station. Albania was the only country in the world in which religion was completely outlawed, yet there are proportionately more evangelical Christians in Albania today than in any Western European nation!

Mission agencies are now invited to teach Bible and Christian ethics in public schools of formerly Communist countries — at the request of the government! I closed down our printing operations after the Iron Curtain was dismantled. Christian books and Bibles can now be printed in Russia and Eastern Europe — on presses that were once used exclusively to produce communist propaganda! And they are printed at a fraction of what it would cost to print in America or Western Europe!

### ***Faith and Forgiveness***

Jesus and the apostles preached the gospel (“good news”) of salvation through faith and forgiveness of sin. Gamaliel would have done well to listen to that message!

Paul wrote to the Romans, “whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Romans 14:23). Little if any faith is involved in cowing to fear-pressure (giving precedence to relationships) or in abiding by a set of strict religious rules. Faith is based on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit who leads us in all truth, helping us to understand God’s will (John 14:17; 15:26 & 16:13).

When we have personal faith in God through Jesus Christ, we recognize our own errors and false concepts of right and wrong. Our conviction of truth comes more and more into line with God’s will as we live by that faith.

True freedom is freedom from sin which allows the exercising of faith. Jesus said, *Without me ye can do nothing* (John 15:5) but with faith as a grain of mustard, *nothing shall be impossible unto you* (Matthew 17:20).

Faith in God takes courage and often causes friction in our relationships, but relationships which result from faith are of much more value.

God doesn't force his will on anyone. Those who reject God will get exactly what they choose: life without God in the company of the godless - in this life and in the next! Sharing a prison cell with evil and wicked criminals is nothing in comparison.

God created us as free beings with the capability and responsibility of making choices. Some people exploit their freedom of choice by willingly rejecting God while others cave to fear-pressure or try to abide by a strict set of religious rules. These responses may seem different on the surface, but they are similar in that both fail to seek a personal relationship with God as their main objective.

God holds us accountable for the choices we make. If we do make wrong choices, however, we can always confess and obtain forgiveness. That is what the gospel or "good news" is all about. God is eager to forgive and reluctant to punish.

As I already mentioned earlier, seeking to know the truth in order to do accordingly is tantamount to what we call "faith". God seeks to impart truth to all who seek it, provided their objective is to live accordingly. Belief must be combined with obedience (John 3:36; John 7:17; Romans 10:16; Hebrews 3:18-19; 4:2-6).

Gamaliel believed in the existence of God and he was very familiar with God's Word, but he never confessed his sin and asked God's forgiveness.

# APPENDIX I

## CHRISTMAS QUIZ

Here are twenty multiple choice questions for you to answer. There is at least one correct answer to each question, but some have more than one right answer (in all 30). You get 5 points for every correct answer for a possible total of 150 points, but for every wrong answer, 5 points will be deducted, so be careful! Since Christmas is to be a joyous occasion, you may find reason to laugh at some of the choices, but don't let yourself get fooled by trick questions! You may not use your Bible, but there is no time limit.

1. When Joseph discovered that Mary was expecting a child...
  - a. ...he was very happy
  - b. ...he got a divorce
  - c. ...he contemplated getting a divorce
  - d. ...he brooded over it until he fell asleep
  
2. Before Jesus was born...
  - a.  Joseph left Mary
  - b.  Mary left Joseph
  - c.  Joseph and Mary led a normal married life
  - d.  Joseph built a crib
  
3. Why did Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem?
  - a.  King Herod's decree required it
  - b.  Joseph and Mary were related to a king
  - c.  A star led them to Bethlehem

- d.  An angel appeared and told them to go
4. How did Joseph and Mary get to Bethlehem?
- a.  They both rode donkeys
  - b.  Mary rode a donkey and Joseph walked
  - c.  They rode camels
  - d.  The Bible doesn't say
5. Which animals were present at the manger when Christ was born?
- a.  Sheep and cows
  - b.  Donkey and ox
  - c.  The Bible only mentions sheep
  - d.  The Bible doesn't say
6. What did the shepherds in the field see?
- a.  an army
  - b.  a choir
  - c.  a star
  - d.  three kings
7. Who were the visitors from the East?
- a.  Relatives
  - b.  Kings
  - c.  Astronomers
  - d.  Farmers
8. How did these visitors find the baby Jesus?
- a.  They followed the star to Nazareth
  - b.  They followed the star to Bethlehem
  - c.  They followed the star to Jerusalem

- d.  They followed the instructions of King Herod
9. What did these visitors do when they arrived?
- a.  They had a snowball fight
  - b.  They found the child in a manger
  - c.  They dreamed of the bad man
  - d.  They sang Christmas carols
10. Which is the most probable time of Christ's birth?
- a.  December
  - b.  In the year "Zero"
  - c.  In the year "One"
  - d.  Five to seven BC
11. The innkeeper...
- a.  ...sent Joseph and Mary away because they were Jews
  - b.  ...was angry because they woke him from a sound sleep
  - c.  ...offered them a place in the stall
  - d.  ...isn't mentioned in the Bible
12. Which of the following books of the Bible says the most about Christ's advent?
- a.  Revelation
  - b.  Matthew
  - c.  Luke
  - d.  Isaiah
13. When Christ was born...
- a.  ...there was snow in Bethlehem
  - b.  ...there was snow in Jerusalem

- c.  ...there was probably snow somewhere in Israel
  - d.  ...the Bible doesn't say
14. How many brothers and sisters did Jesus have?
- a.  Jesus had two brothers
  - b.  There were at least seven children
  - c.  Jesus was an only child
  - d.  The Bible doesn't say
15. Where did Jesus live the shortest length of time?
- a.  Bethlehem
  - b.  Nazareth
  - c.  Egypt
  - d.  Capernaum
16. Why did Joseph and Mary take their newborn child to Jerusalem?
- a.  because Herod wanted to kill him
  - b.  for Christ's baptism
  - c.  for Christ's circumcision
  - d.  for Christ's dedication service
17. When was Jesus baptized?
- a.  shortly after his birth
  - b.  when he was eight days old
  - c.  as a young lad of twelve
  - d.  a few years before his death
18. As a youngster...
- a.  ...Jesus was a good student
  - b.  ...Jesus stayed back

- c.  ...Jesus confounded the teachers with his knowledge
  - d.  ...Jesus' parents were not happy about his behavior
19. Who named the baby?
- a.  An angel gave him his name before he was born
  - b.  Joseph named him
  - c.  He received his name at his circumcision when 8 days old
  - d.  The prophet Isaiah gave him his name
20. How well do you think you did on this test? (Read instructions again!)
- a.  I believe I received at least 75 of the 150 possible points
  - b.  I think I have 50 to 70 points
  - c.  I probably only have 25 to 45 points
  - d.  I doubt if I got more than 20 points

You get 5 points for this question too - if correct! Do not complete question 20 until you have graded yourself on the other nineteen questions.

## **ANSWERS TO QUIZ**

(Read only after completing quiz!)

1. The correct answer is “d”

According to Matthew 1:18-20, Joseph was not at all happy about Mary’s pregnancy. He contemplated privately or secretly breaking their engagement or betrothal. He did not want to hurt Mary. Joseph brooded about the situation until he fell asleep and an angel appeared to him in a dream. Webster’s Dictionary defines “brood” as follows: “to think anxiously or moodily upon; to ponder.” If you marked “c,” please read further.

I am aware of the NIV translation, which uses the word “divorce.” It is a matter of dispute among many theologians, but my research has not turned up anything that would justify the NIV translation “divorce” in this verse. While it is true that a betrothal in New Testament times was taken much more seriously than today’s “engagement,” it was still not a marriage. A marriage was and still is in most if not all countries and cultures a formal, public declaration of commitment, whereas the betrothal or engagement is a declaration of intent. Elsewhere in scriptures, only a legally or publicly recognized marriage could be divorced. The breaking of an engagement could be carried out privately, as Joseph contemplated, but not the divorce of a marriage. If a betrothal actually can be divorced (I leave that up to the reader’s discernment!), then “c” could be allowed as a correct answer (possible ten points if you got them both!).

2. The correct answer is “b”

According to Matthew 1:25, they did not lead a normal married life until after the birth of Christ.

Mary left Joseph when she made an extended visit with her cousin Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist (Luke 1:39 and 56). I warned you about those trick questions!

3. The correct answer is “b”

Not King Herod, but Augustus made the decree mentioned in Luke 2:1-4. According to the genealogies of Matthew 1 and Luke 3, both Joseph and Mary were descendants of King David, whose birthplace was Bethlehem. They were related not only to King David, but also to THE KING OF KINGS (Joseph indirectly through David’s lineage).

4. The correct answer is “d”

The Bible doesn’t say how Joseph and Mary got to Bethlehem. All other answers are “Christmas card theology!”

5. The correct answer is “b”

This idea is taken from the writings of Isaiah who wrote, *The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand* (Isaiah 1:3). Since it is Christmas and we want everyone to live peaceably, “d” may also be considered correct. If you checked both, you get ten points even though that would be a contradiction - it’s Christmas!

6. The correct answer is “a”

The shepherds first saw a solitary angel, who was soon joined by a heavenly “host” (army). The Greek word used here means “army.” This angelic army “praised God, *saying...*” The only reference to angels singing is found in Revelation 15:3, where they are

apparently included in those who sing the song of Moses. Revelation 8 has them blowing trumpets. The NIV also mentions angels singing in Rev. 5:12, but the Greek word is *lego*, which means speaking. I could have used the word “heavenly host,” but then the test would be too easy. People would think they know it all and go on believing that a host is actually a choir.

7. The correct answer is “c”

The Bible does not say that they were kings, nor that there were three of them, although three gifts are mentioned. This is an ancient tradition of the Roman Catholic Church which even gives them names and racial origins. Roots for this tradition can be found in Isaiah 49:7-12 and 60:3-6. One person who took this quiz contended that if I allowed for two possibilities in question 5 (based upon an Old Testament passage), then I should be fair enough to allow it here. You give an inch and they take a mile! Like the Psalmist of Psalm 119:99-100, some students have more understanding than all their teachers and “understand more than the ancients.” If you are one of those “die-hards,” I’ll give you credit for “b” and “c” just because I am a nice guy!

Many Christians argue that “magi” refers to astrologers. This is only partially true. Not all who studied stars were astrologers. I don’t know where the notion originated that ancient students of the stars were always “astrologers” and that we have “astronomers” only in modern times, but it seems that only Christians perpetuate the idea! Modern astronomers are often amazed at the knowledge that ancient civilizations displayed in the science of stars.

The Bible account seems to indicate that these men were serious students of the stars. This is not surprising if our visitors were Chaldeans (as most theologians suppose). Large areas of Chaldea or Babylon are desert. If one has to choose between studying sand by the heat of day or stars in the cool of the night, I suppose the decision would not be too difficult to make.

Now, do you still contend that men can find Christ through astrology?

8. The correct answer is “a”  
(See “Comments and Explanations” below before you get angry!)

9. The correct answer is “c”  
According to Matthew 2:9-12, they dreamed of Herod, who was obviously a very bad man. Only the shepherds are reported to have visited the stall. (See “Comments and Explanations” at end of this quiz!)

10. The correct answer is “d”  
This is the only question that cannot be answered from the Bible, but you should be aware of the fact that our calendar is not correct.

Jesus was born approximately five to seven years BC (which means “Before Christ” - an impossibility, but human beings have the craziest notions, which this test proves). The error arose when the “Christian” calendar was being created by Pope Gregory. The Bible’s references to Jesus being “in his thirties” were misunderstood to mean he was exactly thirty years old. Thus, when they backdated the date of his birth from the date of his crucifixion, they miscalculated. Christ had to be born before Herod’s death in 4 BC.

The dates of Quinius or Cyrenius are 6 or 7 AD. Some experts claim that the Greek word *first* in Luke 2:2 could be translated *before*. This would indicate that the registration took place before the one of Quinius.

11. The correct answer is “d”

The Bible mentions an inn, but not the innkeeper (Luke 2:6)!

12. The correct answer is “d”

More is written about the coming of the Christ in the book of Isaiah than in all four gospels together. It is possible that the book of Psalms should receive this honor. There are quite a few messianic Psalms, but “Advent” can also refer to Christ’s second coming, so Isaiah still wins.

13. The correct answer is “c”

Jeremiah wrote *Does the snow of Lebanon ever vanish from its rocky slopes?* (Jer. 18:14) and there is a similar verse in Isaiah 55:10. The peak of Mount Hermon glistens with perpetual snow.

Some argue that climatic changes have taken place in the thousands of years since these words were written. This may be true in modern times (I haven’t checked it out), but I have been assured that this was still the case when Jesus was born. In no way can “d” be allowed! I hear someone saying, “That is just plain not fair!” Hey, did I say this test was fair?

14. The correct answer is “b,” but “a” is also correct (“two brothers”) because I didn’t say “only two.”

Matthew 13:55-56 mentions four brothers and at least two sisters of Jesus. The Bible doesn’t give the

exact number, but “d” is incorrect unless you can prove “a” and “b” to be wrong. Agreed?

15. The correct answer is “a”

Jesus lived longer times in Nazareth and Capernaum. Many believe that Joseph died sometime before the wedding of Cana, after which the family apparently moved to Capernaum. The stay in Bethlehem was less than 40 days (compare Luke 2:22; 39 and Leviticus 12:4). See comments at end for further clarification.

16. The correct answer is “d”

See Luke 2:22-23. The circumcision took place on the eighth day and Mary would not have been allowed to enter the temple area before the 40 days of purification had passed.

17. The correct answer is “d”

Jesus was baptized by John about three years before his crucifixion.

18. The correct answers are “a,b,c,d”

Read Luke 2:40-52 and you will see that this is true!

19. The correct answers are again “a,b,c,d”

Read Matthew 1:21-25; Luke 2:21 and Isaiah 7:14!

20. Congratulations if you got these five points!

***Here are two more questions for you***

(sorry, no credit!)

1. Which modern song is most closely related to the angel's message to the shepherds?
  - a.  "Silent Night"
  - b.  "Jingle Bells"
  - c.  "Don't Worry, Be Happy!"
  - d.  "O Tannenbaum"

The angels' message to the shepherds was "Fear not, for we bring you tidings of great joy!" That is pretty close to "Don't Worry, Be Happy!," don't you think?

2. Which Christmas symbols have a biblical connection to Christ?
  - a.  Gifts
  - b.  Wreath
  - c.  Candles
  - d.  Christmas tree (Tannenbaum)

**ALL THESE CHRISTMAS SYMBOLS CAN BE FOUND IN THE BIBLE!**

***Gifts***

The wise men brought gifts to Jesus and Christ is God's gift to men. Unfortunately, people seem only interested in what THEY receive for Christmas and show little desire for that which might make JESUS happy on his birthday.

## ***Wreaths***

Faithful believers receive “an incorruptible crown” (I Corinthians 9:25), which is actually a reference to the victor’s wreath commonly presented to winners of athletic events. Other references to this can be found in I Thessalonians 2:19; II Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; I Peter 5:4. According to Revelation 4:10, we will lay our wreaths (trophies) at the feet of Jesus. The way many people act at Christmas time reminds one more of the crown associated with Christ’s death, the crown of thorns.

## ***Candles***

Jesus is the “Light of the world.” John wrote, *In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not* (John 1:4-5). The word “comprehended” could be better translated “received” or “accepted.” If we stop to consider this for a moment, that is a scientific impossibility! There is no darkness which cannot be penetrated by the light of the smallest candle, yet wicked men manage to shut out the brightest light which ever shone in this world and prefer to remain in their darkness!

Christians too, are to be light for the world. Our light is not to be hidden or “kept under a bushel” (Matthew 5:14). Man’s most noble attempt to live without the light of God can be compared to a painter, who mixes all his colors together in order to get the most brilliant color. But that color would be a very dirty brown! With light, all colors mixed together make white! Joy and sorrow, success and failure, giving and receiving, sickness and health, living and dying are all part of life. Without Christ, what frustration and gloom! In Christ, the eternal Light of the world, what glory and hope!

## ***Tannenbaum or Evergreen***

The prophet Hosea (14:9) compares the Lord to a green fir tree (Martin Luther's translation reads, "Tannenbaum"). Christ is often compared to a tree or vine (Isaiah 11:1-10; John 15:1-8; Rev. .2:14 and 19). During the Feast of the Tabernacles, the Israelites took branches and built temporary huts. They stayed in these shelters for the duration of the feast. It was about the time of this feast when Jesus was born in a stall and laid in the manger.

In II Kings 16:4, the prophet of the Lord accuses the king and nation of sacrificing to idols "*under every green tree.*" This is an apt description of the Christmas celebration in many families! Paul wrote that materialism is in essence just plain idolatry (Ephesians 5:5 "*...covetous man, who is an idolater*"; Colossians 3:5 "*...covetousness, which is idolatry*"; I Corinthians 10:7 "*Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play*"). On the way to Golgotha, Jesus said to his followers, "*For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?*" (Luke 23:31) The prophet Amos could have been describing many modern westerners, considering the frivolity with which they celebrate Christmas. "*I hate, I despise your religious feasts (Christmas holidays); I cannot stand your assemblies (Christmas programs). Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings (Christmas dinner and cookies), I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings (Christmas gifts), I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs (Christmas carols)! I will not listen to the music of your harps (Christmas concerts) ...You have lifted up the shrine of your king (Santa Claus), the pedestal of your idols (Christmas tree), the star of your god — which you made for yourselves (Christmas lights).*" (Amos 5:20-27)

## *Comments and Explanations on the Quiz*

Wow, did I stir up a wasp nest with question Nr. 8! Some who have taken the quiz were so angry about my desecration of their manger scenes, that they didn't even bother to look up the Bible passages I gave them. A few argued that the holy family didn't return to Nazareth until they got back from Egypt. Others claimed that the "house" where the wise men found Jesus was also in Bethlehem. It seems more difficult to get the family out of Bethlehem than it was for them to find a room in the town's inns.

How did the wise men (this term is acceptable, for wise men still seek Jesus!) know that a king had been born in Israel? We know that they saw a star, but how did they recognize the special significance of that particular star? The wise men were obviously familiar with the one yet unfulfilled prophecy of a famous Babylonian prophet, Balaam (or Bileam).

In Numbers 21, we find Israel wandering through the desert because the people listened to faithless spies instead of Joshua and Caleb. In their ensuing quest for food and water, they wander from one place to another, gradually moving northward. As they approach the countries of Moab and Ammon, Moses requests permission to pass through these kingdoms, but their kings refused.

Because God had warned Moses not to declare war against these nations (God gave Esau a specific territorial inheritance just as he had given Canaan to Israel - Deuteronomy 2:9-29), Israel circled around and even paid for all the food and water needed for the journey.

After this, Israel sent messengers from its camp in Jahaz to the king of the Amorites in Hesbon (about 20 miles distant). Moses requested permission to pass through his land just as he had requested of Moab and

Ammon. He even made reference to the fact, that their journey around these countries was without incident and that they had purchased food and water. But the Amorite king also refused to allow their passage through his territory (Deut. 2:26-37). This time, Israel declared war and easily defeated the Amorites. Deuteronomy 2:34 reports that the entire population was wiped out! The region of the Amorites had at one time belonged to Moab (Numbers 21:25-30).

When King Og of Basan heard of this victory, he feared that he would be next and sent his armies to fight Israel. He probably surmised that Israel would be weak and tired after the battle against the Amorites. But his plan didn't work and Og experienced the same fate as the Amorites.

Although Israel had already passed around his territory without incident, Balak, King of Moab now began to fear that his new neighbor could seek revenge for his inhospitable treatment. The people he had once viewed as peaceful Nomads, were now seen as a powerful and dangerous threat. Balak felt compelled to declare war on Israel, but being a very religious (superstitious) man, he first sought the help of a renowned sorcerer named Balaam.

Chaldea or Babylon (now Iran and Iraq) was famous for its sorcerers, astronomers and astrologers. Balaam lived and prophesied about 1400 years before Christ in Pethor on the Euphrates River. According to Nahum 1:11, Balaam was actually from Nineveh. The word "Pethor" means "sorcerer" or "diviner." Perhaps this passage should be rendered, "*...sent to the city of sorcery, which lies on the Euphrates River.*" It is possible that the Edomite king was Balaam's brother, whose territory was to the south of Moab and north of Midean (Genesis 36:32). The names Mideonite and Moabite were often

used interchangeably (see Num. 22:7, 31:2 and 25:1-6). The Moabite king kept Mideanite priests as his advisors, and it was perhaps these who referred him to Balaam.

Whatever the case may have been, Balak called for Balaam to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22-24). Balaam was warned by God in a dream not to go, but Balak insisted (22:12). He believed that Balaam was holding out for more money, so he sent other messengers, offering to pay whatever Balaam should demand. Isn't it amazing, the extent that some people will go to in order to protect their health, wealth and lives when they are not even in danger? Unbelievers are usually superstitious and see everything through these spectacles. He who doesn't fear God, fears everything and everyone.

After an eventful journey which involved a talking donkey, Balaam finally arrived in Moab. But to the utter chagrin of the Moabite king, the famous Chaldean prophet could only bring forth blessings for Israel. After several futile attempts to curse Israel, Balak commanded Balaam to cease his prophecies and return home. But God told Balaam to prophesy just one more time. This time he foretold the appearance of an unusual star, which would announce the birth of a special ruler in Israel (Numbers 24:17).

The appearance of a new or different star alone would not in itself have provided sufficient reason for the wise men to set out on their long journey to Jerusalem. They were undoubtedly familiar with the yet unfulfilled prophecy of another famous Chaldean prophet, Belteshazzar, better known to us as Daniel. It was acclaimed of both Balaam and Daniel, that all their prophecies came to pass (Numbers 22:6 and Daniel 6:3). Daniel lived about 800 years after Balaam and foretold the exact time in which that special Jewish monarch would arrive on the scene. He even prophesied that this

special prince would be executed without a fair trial. (Daniel 9:24-26).

Six centuries after Daniel and fourteen centuries after Baalam, the Chaldean astronomers or “wise men” of Matthew’s gospel saw a special star and concluded that it had an important significance. Perhaps they searched for clues in the gigantic collection of more than 100,000 clay tablets that were stored in Nineveh. At least 30,000 of these still exist, most of them in a British museum. Many of the tablets have to do with observations of the stars. The wise men may also have had access to Daniel’s writings. After recognizing that the only unfulfilled prophecies of their two most famous prophets coincided exactly, the wise men set out on their long journey (about 600 miles) to Jerusalem, where they fully expected to find a newborn prince in the palace of King Herod the Great.

***“And when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his Son...”*** Galatians 4:4

The arrival of the wise men in Jerusalem did not go unnoticed. Their query about a newborn king of the Jews caused no small stir in the king’s palace and also in the city. You see, the wise men were not the only ones who were familiar with Old Testament prophecy. Jewish leaders and residents of Jerusalem, including the aged Simeon and Anna, expected the imminent arrival of the promised Messiah (Matthew 2:3; Luke 2:25-40). Joseph of Arimathaea expected the Messiah (Mark 15:43) and Luke 3:15 declares that the people of Israel were in general expectation of the Christ, wondering if John the Baptist could be the promised Messiah. It is reported that leading Jews sent Levites and priests to Bethany near the Jordan River to investigate this possibility (compare Malechai 4:5; Matthew 11:14; 17:11- 13; John 1:19-21).

When the wise men told King Herod that they had seen “*his*” star (i.e. of the newborn prince) in the East, he

took this news very seriously (“*Even the devils believe and tremble!*” - James 2:19). Herod called all the leading theologians into his palace for consultation. Gamaliel, the Apostle Paul’s famous teacher, was probably among their number. In fact, Gamaliel must have also been in Bethlehem, for he too was of David’s lineage. Perhaps he slept in the over-crowded inn while his donkey witnessed the birth of the Messiah in the stall! The Chief Priests and Scribes told King Herod that according to Micah 5:1, the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. Herod sent the wise men to this town with instructions to report back to him on their findings (Matthew 2:1-8). He was so upset about the failure of the wise men to report back that he ordered the slaughter of all male infants, two years old and younger (historians estimate the number between 25-100).

The wise men had hardly set out for Bethlehem, when they again saw the star that had appeared to them in their homeland. The star did NOT lead them to Jerusalem as some assume (Matthew 2:1 and 9-11). The wise men did NOT obey Herod, but they obeyed God instead — as wise men still do (Matthew 2:9-12)! The Bible doesn’t name the town or place where the Magi found Christ other than mentioning a “house,” but it certainly was NOT in Bethlehem. Jesus was circumcised when eight days old (either in Bethlehem or Nazareth). The Bible DOES say that Jesus was dedicated in the temple of Jerusalem after the period of purification (40 days according to Leviticus 12:4) and that the family “returned to Nazareth” (Luke 2:21-22 & 39). They also returned to Nazareth after the trip to Egypt (Matthew 2:23). Consider how much time it would have taken for the Magi to get to Jerusalem (about 600 miles) and for Joseph and Mary to get to Egypt and back (at least 200 miles).

Some have argued against my contention that the house was in Nazereth, stating that Jesus would not have been in danger if he had not been in Bethlehem. Only the children in the surrounds of Bethlehem were killed. There would have been no need for Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt.

Let me first state that Jesus was never in any real danger! Many attempts were made on his life beginning with Herod, continuing with Satan himself during the wilderness temptation (Matthew 4) and throughout his ministry (Luke 9:51, John 7:6-8 and John 8:59). When in seeming danger, Jesus declared that his time “*was not yet come.*” Being omnipotent, God could easily have kept Jesus safe from Herod’s baby-killing henchmen. Don’t you think that the army of angels which appeared to the shepherds could have warded off Herod’s soldiers? Jesus said at his crucifixion that he could summon two legions of angels (48,000-72,000) to rescue him from the cross, but his time had now come. Jesus prayed to his Father in heaven, “*Not my will, but thine be done.*”

One reason Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt was that scripture should be fulfilled (Matthew 2:15). Another reason was that God probably wanted Joseph and Mary to live peacefully with their baby. Can you imagine what it would be like for a nursing mother to be constantly anxious for her baby’s life? Joseph was fearful even after God told them that there was no more threat of death (Matthew 2:20-22). Our loving heavenly Father protected them from the anxiety and stress of a fugitive life by sending them to Egypt and later to Nazareth. He even provided them with gold (from the wise men) which would suffice for their travel expenses.

Herod had all male children in the surrounds of Bethlehem, two years old and younger killed “*...according to the TIME which he had diligently*

*inquired of the wise men..*” This slaughter obviously took place long after the birth of Jesus. Even if Joseph and Mary had been living in Nazareth, they certainly would have been struck with terror at the very thought of such a vicious attack designed to kill their special child. Herod was a hard calculator, who didn’t give up easily and left nothing to chance (see Appendix III). “*Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.*” (Matthew 2:13). He was certain to learn sooner or later that his attempt to kill the newborn prince had not been successful! Even though further attempts would be equally doomed to failure, Joseph and Mary were human and God spared them this stress.

Incidentally, several have argued that Mary could not have entered the temple even after her purification, since women were forbidden to enter the temple.

Wow! No wonder Jesus admired the poor widow of Mark 12:41-43, who threw her “mite” into the temple treasury, apparently from outside the wall! She must have had a fantastic aim! The aged Anna would have been a terrible sinner, for she “*departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day*” (Luke 2:37).

Seriously, I do not pretend to be an expert on the temple of Herod which stood at the time of Christ. The difficulty probably arises from our own concept of church buildings. The term “temple” (“sanctuary” - holy area) sometimes referred to the central structure, consisting of the holy place and Holy of Holies. This was divided by the veil which was rent at the crucifixion. Then there was an inner court where only priests were permitted. There was also the “greater,” “outer,” “upper” or “peoples” court, a court of the Gentiles and a women’s court. When people spoke of the temple, they often referred to the entire temple complex which measured approximately

300 by 500 yards. Only the High Priest was allowed in the Holy of Holies and other areas were reserved for priests or men only, but women were allowed in some parts of this temple area. Mary was definitely there, for the aged and godly Simeon spoke to her in the temple and blessed her together with Joseph (Luke 2:33-34).

From the cradle to the cross and from the cross to the crown, Jesus Christ is LORD! Some day everyone of us will stand before Jesus Christ and be called to account of our lives (II Corinthians 5:10). If you have not yet accepted God's gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, then I invite you to take this time to kneel before him and pray, asking His forgiveness and yielding your life to Him. Give God YOUR life as a present that really pleases Him (Romans 12:1-2). You will experience the most wonderful Christmas of your life, and the angels will have reason to celebrate your new birth (Luke 15:7)!

Have a blessed Christmas and may you be resolved to study your Bible more carefully in the New Year!

## APPENDIX II

### “SILENT NIGHT”

By Ralph Harvey

*The well-known Christmas Carol, “Silent Night,” has not lost any of its allure for millions of people around the globe since it was first sung in 1818. It is not only the most popular German Christmas Carol, but also the most popular piece of music ever produced! Some of the details are still in dispute, but there is general agreement upon certain facts. I would like to share these with you.*

#### ***The Hungry Church Mouse Version***

Nearly everyone knows that a hungry church mouse gnawed a hole in the bellows of the old church organ in Oberndorf, and that in just a few hours time, Josef Mohr and his good friend Franz Gruber produced what would become the most popular song in the world!

This makes for a terrific story, but there is no documentation for the role of the mouse. We do know that according to what Gruber called the “authentic story” (written 36 years later!), the organ was in a sad state of repair and that the church had no money to remedy the situation. It is, of course, very possible that a hungry mouse actually did help to incur the damage to the organ, so I see no valid reason to call this a falsification.

Nor was Silent Night an entirely spontaneous production. Josef Mohr wrote the six verses of Silent Night in 1816 while serving the church of Mariapfarr, two years before the musical scores were penned. Franz

Gruber had already written musical compositions for various occasions, and this was simply another task. Neither Mohr nor Gruber could possibly have perceived that their co-production would someday make them famous. Their main concern was that the traditional Christmas Eve midnight mass not be entirely destitute of music.

The guitar was seen as a worldly instrument in those days and not fit for use in a church. As organist, Gruber was probably not very excited about composing a piece for Mohr's guitar. The men were perhaps more concerned about how the people would receive the implementation of this instrument than how they would like their new song.

### *Who Were the Composers?*

#### **JOSEF MOHR**

Josef Mohr, who wrote the text to Silent Night, was born on December 11, 1792. He was the third illegitimate child born to a 41-year-old, unmarried seamstress, Anna Schoiber. His father was Josef Franz Mohr, a soldier from Stranach near Mariapfarr, who had deserted from the army on June 21 of that year. Mohr's mother was required to fill out an official "Fornication Protocol" after which the Executioner of Salzburg, Josef Wohlmüt, served as godfather at his Christening service.

Mohr began school and somehow, the Director of the Cathedral Choir in Salzburg, Johan Nepomuk Hiernle, heard Mohr's clear tenor voice. He inquired about him and took the lad under his wing. Mohr soon became one of his favorite Choir Boys in the University Choir. He later sang in the St. Peter's Cathedral Choir in Salzburg. At sixteen, he began musical studies in the Benedictine Monastery of Kremsmünster. After returning to Salzburg, Mohr enrolled in a seminary to study for the priesthood.

Upon completion of his studies, there was some debate about Mohr's qualifications for a holy office, but probably with influence from Hiernle, he was ordained on August 3, 1815. On August 22, Mohr was appointed as assistant to the priest Nessler in his home town of Mariapfarr.

Circumstances surrounding his appointment as priest in Oberndorf are quite interesting. Until 1816, Oberndorf was part of the Bavarian town of Laufen, separated only by the Salzach River. In this year, however, an agreement between Austria and Bavaria made the river the border, and Oberndorf, which means "The upper village," became an independent town. The citizens of Laufen were sorry to lose their lovely church with its rococo architecture which was located on the opposite side of the river. But the people of Oberndorf were apparently not so attached to it. In 1906, ninety years after Silent Night was written, the citizens of Oberndorf decided to tear down the church of the now famous song's origin rather than make needed repairs. Interestingly, the church in Oberndorf was named after St. Nicholas!

According to official documents of the Catholic Church, the appointment of Josef Mohr to the new vacancy in Oberndorf was seriously questioned by the Diocese's Provisor Noestler. His comments are recorded as follows: "The curate priest Mohr acts immaturely, walking through the streets with a long tobacco pipe, his pouch at his side. Similarly to the ship boys, he rides the river at flood stage, gambles, drinks and above all, he sings unedifying songs."

The reference to gambling ("spielen") probably refers to a card game with stakes, still popular in Austrian taverns. Oberndorf was a river port town. Local ships transported salt from mines in Hallein to Linz, where it was sold on public markets. The "ship boys" were known

to be a rowdy bunch. It was apparently the citizens of Oberndorf who insisted upon having Mohr as their priest!

After his tenure in Oberndorf, Mohr served several churches in the province of Salzburg. He served longest in Wagrain, from 1837 until his death in 1848.

## **FRANZ XAVER GRUBER**

Gruber was born into a weaver's family on November 25, 1787. His birthplace was the small town of Hochburg, near Braunau, where Adolf Hitler was born. Franz Gruber's birth house was torn down as recently as 1976, but Hitler's birth house still stands.

Franz's father wanted him to learn the weaver's trade, but a teacher recognized other gifts in his student and persuaded the father to allow Franz to pursue a teaching career. Franz Gruber's marital experiences were unusual to say the least. Gruber's first wife was the widow of his teaching predecessor, and she had been married once before that. After she died, Gruber married a former student, and when she died, he married a third time!

Franz Gruber accepted a teaching position in Arndorf in 1807. In 1816, shortly before the 24-year-old Mohr arrived as curate priest, Gruber accepted a position as church organist in nearby Oberndorf. Some sources claim that his decision was with hopes of obtaining a teaching position in Oberndorf, while others believe that Gruber just wanted to escape military service. Suffice it to say that Gruber was organist from 1816 until 1827. For reasons unknown to us, Gruber was replaced as organist in 1827 after which he accepted a teaching position in Berndorf. On July 2, 1835, he moved to Hallein to become church organist. He was still in Hallein 18 years later, when he was discovered as composer of the now famous carol, Silent Night. Few people realize that Franz

Xaver Gruber is responsible for at least 90 other musical compositions. He died in Hallein in 1863.

### ***How “Silent Night” Came to Be***

After realizing that the defective church organ would be unusable for the midnight mass, Mohr took his two-year-old Christmas poem to the home of his friend, Franz Gruber. Gruber was church organist and a school teacher in nearby Arnsdorf. Within a few hours, Gruber had set the composition to music for two solo voices and a choir. Mohr sang tenor and Gruber bass, while the church choir joined in on the refrain. Musical accompaniment was provided by Mohr’s guitar. Called “a plucking violin,” the guitar was considered to be a worldly instrument, used mainly in taverns. According to Gruber, the townspeople received the new song with enthusiasm.

The original carol had six verses, but only verses 1, 2 and 6 are generally known. Experts agree that the 3rd verse is actually the most beautiful (from German):

*“Silent Night, Holy Night, which brought the world salvation, from the heights of Heaven, the fullness of grace can be witnessed in the form of a man.”*

### ***“Unknown Origin”***

The organ builder, Carl Mauracher, made temporary repairs to the old organ in the spring of 1819 and built a new organ in 1825. On one of his visits, he discovered the text and music of Silent Night (then called “Christmas Song”) and took it back to Tyrol with him. Zillertal folk music groups began singing it in Alpine villages, and before long, the song was known in Munich and other cities. The Tyrolean Strasser Family, which traveled around Europe singing and selling gloves of their own manufacture, sang the song at a “Tyrolean Evening” in Leipzig. A Leipzig newspaper, *Tagesblatt* requested them

to return to the city the following year and sing the carol at a Christmas concert. The concert took place on December 15, 1832. Following this appearance, the Friese Publishing Company of Dresden and Leipzig published the carol in a collection entitled, "Four Genuine Tyrolean Songs of the Strasser Family." The carol was described as a "Tyrolean folk song of questionable origin." From that time on, the carol began its ascent to fame, conquering the hearts of people everywhere.

In 1853, the King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, spotted Silent Night in a song book with the comment, "Composer unknown." Suspecting that the carol came from Michael Hayden, he requested the Concert Master of The Royal Chapel of Berlin to find the composer of this music. The Concert Master began earnest inquiries about the carol's origin by writing to authorities in Salzburg and Vienna. In 1854, church researchers were able to trace the song to Franz Gruber. Gruber, now 67, was organist in the church of Hallein near Salzburg. No one was more surprised than Gruber to receive a request from the King of Prussia! He was asked to give details about the origin of Silent Night. Gruber sent a letter to Berlin, giving "authentic information" about the origin of the music and short biographies of the composers. From his letter which rests in city archives, we know that Mohr died as a vicar on December 4, 1848 in Wagrain. He was so poor that the town had to pay his funeral expenses.

Gruber was pressured by the King of Prussia to produce the original scores of Silent Night. Because he could not find these, he recomposed the song from memory. Besides this one, six other copies written by Gruber have been found. Some of them predate his "original authentic" version and have differing melodies.

The *Silent Night Historical Society*, based in Salzburg, has collected a wealth of information on this

subject including bizarre fiction and proven facts. One particularly stubborn story declared Mohr to be the sole author of Silent Night. It claimed that Gruber saw his chance for personal fame or profit after the song had become popular and Mohr was no longer alive to tell the truth.

A recently discovered authentic copy of Silent Night by Josef Mohr himself astounded the music world and disproves this claim. The existence of this document was not known until a private person in Munich presented it to the Carolinum Augusteum Museum in Salzburg on December 8th, 1995. According to Mohr, the six verses of the “Christmas Song” as it was then called, were written by himself in 1816. Mohr clearly gives Gruber credit for the melody. Mohr’s copy was made in 1825 (about the same time the song was discovered by the organ repairman) and is apparently closer to the original than any of Gruber’s copies. It was even written for two voices with guitar accompaniment, as was the original.

It took years for the story of the song’s origin to catch up to the now famous Christmas carol. By this time people all over the world were singing different tunes and texts. A German opera singer, Josef Bletzacher, of Hannover, discovered a copy of the carol in a school house while visiting the New York World’s Fair in 1873. It was titled, “Choral of Salzburg.” As late as 1900, the song was still known as a “Protestant Folk Song” in Norway!

### ***A Grotesque Attempt to Honor a Composer!***

The town of Wagrain, where Josef Mohr served as vicar until his death in 1848, decided in 1912 to have a bust made of their now famous priest. Since no picture of the composer existed, Mohr’s body was dug up from the cemetery in Wagrain. After removing the skull, the body

was reburied vertically in his old grave! The skull spent the next quarter of a century collecting dust! It was finally cemented into the wall of a memorial chapel which was built on the site of the old St. Nicholas Church in 1937. The original church was torn down in 1906.

The famous Christmas carol was given a different text by the Nazis in 1942 and used as an instrument of propaganda in radio broadcasts. Nevertheless, it was reported during World War II, that soldiers on both sides of the conflict ceased fighting on Christmas Eve and sang the carol together!

“Silent Night” has not lost any of its allure for millions of people around the globe. It is not only the most popular German Christmas carol, but also the most popular piece of music ever produced! It has been translated into at least 178 languages, and there are 14 differing Latin versions of the song! Scores of books, dramas and films have been devoted to the origin of this song.

Josef Mohr’s guitar which was used to accompany the carol in 1818 can still be seen in the Hallein Museum near Salzburg.

## **APPENDIX III**

### **HEROD THE GREAT**

Because King Herod figures prominently in the Bible, it is only proper that we deal with this individual in more detail. We can learn more about Gamaliel, his father and grandfather, who lived under the reign of Herod the Great.

Herod had to overcome two obstacles in gaining favor of the Jews. First of all, the Hasmonean family which had previously governed the people, was still present and many of the people showed affection and loyalty to them. As long as these remained, his kingdom would not be secure.

Secondly, Jewish law allowed that only a Jew should rule over them, and Herod was an Edomite.

Herod systematically killed all those Rabbis who opposed his kingship. Two sons of Betira escaped and held leading positions in the Sanhedrin after the death of Shemaiah and Abtalion. According to Josephus, Shammai escaped as did Hillel and Menahem. The Gemara relates that a certain Baba Ben Buta also escaped and later persuaded Herod to rebuild the Temple.

When Herod called the leading Jews into his palace, we can conjecture that the above named might have been present. The sons of Betira were Judah and Joshua. Others might have been Jonathan ben Uziel, the Targumist, and Simeon, the son of Hillel and most certainly, Gamaliel.

#### ***Edomites***

King Herod the Great was one of the last Edomites or Idumeans, a later rendering of the Old Testament term,

Edomite. The Edomites were descendants of Esau. Edom means: “reddish,” probably referring to the reddish color of Esau’s skin when he was born. Some contend that it references the color of his brother Jacob’s bean porridge (Genesis 25:25 & 30).

I shared a historical event involving the Edomites in Chapter 8, in which the Edomite king refused to allow Moses and Israel to pass through his territory. I won’t repeat that information here.

### ***Saul’s Servant, Doeg***

An Edomite named Doeg is mentioned in I Samuel 21:8 u. 22:8-19.

David became afraid that King Saul would kill him and fled to Gath – of all places! Gath is where Goliath was from! Angry that David had escaped, Saul accused his subordinates of having a secret loyalty to David and helping him to flee. The Edomite Doeg saw his golden opportunity to get rich and receive power. He revealed what he had observed in Nob, when David was talking to the priest, Ahimalech. He must certainly have known that this information would cost the priest his life. Saul demanded that not only Ahimalech, but all the priests of God be killed. The soldiers refused to carry out the order of their king, but Doeg did not hesitate. Not only 85 priests, but all the people of Nob. were slaughtered that day. Josephus gives the number as 385 men, women and children.

There is a second biblical account of Saul and a trusted servant. It is quite possible that these may refer to the same person. I will briefly outline the incidents here and analyze them afterwards.

Before Saul became king, an incident involving him and a trusted servant is reported in I Samuel 9 and 10. A number of donkeys belonging to Saul’s father, Kish, had

strayed and were nowhere to be found. Kish sent Saul and the servant to search for them. There are many reasons why I believe that the unnamed servant in chapter nine is Doeg of chapters 21-22.

- As a rule, Jews kept non-Jewish servants and Doeg was an Edomite.
- Kisch must have had a high opinion of his servant, for Saul said that his Father would be concerned for them both if they delayed their return (I Samuel 9:5; compare with 10:2).
- The unnamed servant was also held in high esteem by Saul, who chose this servant to go with him. Samuel gave both Saul and his servant seats of honor at the head of the table. Except when Saul was anointed, the servant was always present (about 5 days). He was witness when Saul joined with the prophets in prophesying. Saul's uncle (Ner? See I Samuel 14:50-51) not only asked to see Saul, but the servant as well (10:14).
- It is quite possible, that this servant was among those sent out into all Israel by Saul in I Samuel 11:7-11.
- The Servant seemed to follow the Jewish faith, for it was he who suggested that they consult the prophet of God regarding the whereabouts of the missing donkeys. We know that the same was true of Doeg, for he was in Nob when David received the sword of Goliath and provision from Ahimalech (I Sam. 21:7).
- Saul had respect for his servant's opinions and advice. The servant was intelligent and showed a capacity for thinking ahead. Saul was embarrassed because he had no gift for Samuel, but the servant had money.
- Saul's most valuable possessions during the first part of his reign would have been his herds. Doeg was made the chief herdsman. Certainly, the trusted and

faithful servant mentioned in chapter 9 would have been the prime candidate for such a position.

We don't know what happened to Doeg, but if he was not killed in battle or had not yet died when David became king, he would certainly have had him put to death. We do learn that David defeated the Edomites after the death of Saul, killing 18,000 men (II Samuel 8:14). According to I Kings 11:14-22, nearly all Edomite men were wiped out by Joab in a period of about six months. Only Hadad and a few others were able to flee for their lives to Egypt. Following the death of David, Hadad returned from Egypt and fought against King Solomon, hoping to regain power. We do not know much about the war, but Solomon took an Edomite woman as one of his many wives.

In Psalm 137:7-9, Edom is called a "daughter of Babylon" who longs for the destruction of Jerusalem. The Psalmist blesses those who would smash Edom's children against the rocks! Nine centuries before Christ, a remnant of Edomites attempted to free themselves from the yoke of Israel, but King Amaziah slaughtered 10,000 in battle and tossed 10,000 others (probably including children) over a precipice. Their bodies were smashed on the rocks (II Chronicles 25:11-12). The judgment of God against Edom is also described in Jeremiah 49:15-22; Amos 1:6-12 and by the prophet Obadiah. The last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, reports that Edom had once again aspired to power and glory, but he also prophesied that God would destroy all their works (Malachi 1:4). That prophecy was fulfilled in New Testament times.

### ***The Last of the Edomites***

Although the Edomites were severely decimated by wars, a remnant, called "Idumeans," fought in battles against the Maccabean Kings (II Maccabees 10:15-23).

Some 40,000 were killed, but soldiers serving under the Maccabean, Simon, accepted a bribe of 70,000 drachma for the release of several prisoners. King Herod the Great was apparently a descendant of one of those Idomeans who were allowed to escape.

### ***Herod the Great***

Herod the Great was born in 73 BC, the son of Antipater. His mother was an Arabian named Kypros and he had at least one brother, Phasael, who committed suicide during a Maccabean imprisonment in 40 BC. Antipater named Herod Governor of Gallilee in 47 BC, and with Roman support, Herod waged wars against the Maccabeans. He captured Jerusalem after a five month siege in 37 BC, an event which marks the beginning of his reign as King of Judah. Antipater was murdered 43 BC. Both Herod and Antipater, like Saul's servant, Doeg, claimed adherence to the Jewish religion. Although Herod was already married, he also took a Jewish woman of Hasmonian descent, Marianne, to be his wife - probably to gain support of the Jews.

Herod was a ruthless and unscrupulous man whose only aim in life was to gain power and make a name for himself. In order to assure himself an eternal monument, he built magnificent architectural masterpieces including several palaces. The Temple was intended to be his greatest achievement. His first act as king was to execute 45 followers of the Maccabean, Antigonus. Eventually, nearly all Maccabeans were killed under his rule. As Herod grew older, he began to distrust everyone and believed that "all were out to get him."

Rabban Gamaliel He brutally executed anyone he distrusted. He had his Hasmonian wife, Marianne, executed in 7 BC (altogether, he had ten wives) and murdered three of his seven sons. He banned two other

sons, and the two who survived lived in incest with their own sisters. One of them (see “Herod Antipas” below) murdered John the Baptist.

Just five days before his own death in 4 BC (our calendar is erroneous), Herod executed his oldest son Antipater II and ordered all prominent personalities of his kingdom to come to Jericho. When they arrived, soldiers herded them into the hippodrome and locked the gates. Herod gave instructions to kill them all so that after his own death, there would be a great mourning! Fortunately, the soldiers didn’t carry out the order.

It is likely that leading Scribes, Pharisees and High Priests were among those gathered into the hippodrome, which would have included Hillel and Simeon and perhaps Gamaliel.

### ***Herod’s Temple***

Herod began construction on the temple around 21 B.C. and it was completed in 64 A.D., an 80-year construction project. Between 10,000 and 18,000 workmen were employed constantly, and 1,000 wagons were needed to transport materials.

Gamaliel was probably a teenager when construction commenced, and he witnessed the construction process throughout his entire lifetime. It was not quite completed when he died around 50 A.D.. As Rabbi, son of a Rabbi and grandson of a Rabbi, Gamaliel must have spent a considerable amount of time in this magnificent edifice.

When Jesus cleansed the temple during his first year of ministry, the Jewish leaders asked him by what authority he did this. Jesus replied that if they would destroy the temple, he would raise it up again in three days. *The Jews replied, Forty and six years is this temple in building, and wilt thou raise it up in three days?* (John 2:20). Jesus was of course referring to the temple of his

body, but his statement was brought as an accusation against him at the trial which led to his crucifixion.

The magnificent temple was totally destroyed by Titus only six years after its completion. Just as Jesus prophesied in Matthew 24:2, not one stone remained on top of another.

### ***John the Baptist and Herod Antipas***

Herod Antipas (4 BC - AD 39) had a half brother named Philip who enjoyed wealth and acclaim but was not made one of the four regents. Philip had a beautiful and intelligent niece, Herodias, the daughter of his brother, Aristobulus, who was executed by Herod. He took her to be his wife, and they had an equally attractive daughter, Salome. Herodias, however, laid her lustful eyes on King Herod Antipas and enticed him to commit adultery with her. Antipas took her into his palace and lived in open adultery with her. In order to marry her (perhaps to appease Herodias), Antipas divorced his first wife, the daughter of Arabian King Aretas IV. In retaliation, Aretas declared war and brought Antipas a great defeat.

Many pious Jews secretly condemned the wickedness of Herod Antipas, but the Scribes and Jewish leaders, who should have been outspoken about his behavior, feared Herod and remained silent. John the Baptist did not remain silent, telling Herod both privately and publicly what God's Word had to say about his promiscuity (Leviticus 18:16; 20:21). Herod Antipas was not prepared to change his ways, but feared to have John put to death because the people believed him to be a prophet.

Herodias was furious, however, and sought opportunity to have John killed. The king had John imprisoned and the sly Herodias eventually found her opportunity. Salome (the name is supplied by Josephus) danced before the king and his cohorts. They were

delighted and the king offered her a wish as her reward. According to Herodias' instructions, Salome requested the head of John the Baptist. Reluctantly, Herod granted the wish. The head of John was served to Herodias as food would be served on a platter (Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29 and Luke 9:7-9).

Herod was apparently distraught by this event and even had nightmares afterward. When he heard of Jesus' miracles and preaching, he believed that John had been resurrected from the dead. Luke 23:8-9 tells us that Herod Antipas spoke face to face with Jesus before the crucifixion and hoped to see him perform a miracle, but Jesus refused to answer him. Antipas is also mentioned in Luke 3:1-20; 13:31-32; 23:8-15; Acts 4:28 and 13:1

### ***Herod Agrippa I (AD 37-44)***

At the time when Herod the Great executed Marianne and her two sons, another of his sons, Aristobul, with his wife Bernice (a niece of Herod), had a three-year-old son, Herod Agrippa I (other children were Herod of Chalkis and Herodias). Agrippa was sent to Rome where he received his training along with Drusus, son of Emperor Tiberius (mentioned in Luke 3:1; 20:22; Matt. 22:17; Mark 12:14; John 19:12). Agrippa returned to Palestine in 23 AD.

In 36 AD, Agrippa again traveled to Rome where he made friends with Gaius, son of Emperor Caligula. In 37, Caligula named Agrippa ruler over the kingdoms of his recently deceased Uncle Philip. Agrippa was not content with that honor and filed complaints against his uncle, Herod Antipas. Caligula banned Antipas in 39 AD, and Agrippa assumed control over his territories.

After Caligula was murdered, Claudius, son of Drusus was made Emperor and Agrippa received control of Judea and Samaria. He now ruled over the same

territories as his grandfather, Herod the Great. Herod Agrippa I is mentioned in Acts 12:1-23. His children were Agrippa II, Marianne, Bernice, Drusilla and another son, Drusus.

### ***Herod Agrippa II (AD 50-70)***

Herod Agrippa II was the son of Agrippa I and definitely not well loved. His open sexual relationship with his sister Bernice caused many to despise him. Agrippa II is mentioned in Acts 25:13- 26:32.

After Titus destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, Agrippa II was deported to Rome, where he died. The life work of Herod the Great was thus destroyed, and the remaining Edomites (Idumeans) were systematically exterminated during the following three years. Although nothing more is mentioned of the Edomites, their last chief city, Hebron, the second oldest city of Palestine after Jerusalem, is still the subject of heated disputes between Jews and Palestinians.

### ***Concluding Comments About Herod the Great***

- When Herod received the news of a newborn king, he was troubled (Gr.= shocked, frightened).
- Herod believed in Christ
- He desired to know more of God's Word
- He publicly professed a desire to worship him

But Herod commanded that scores of innocent babies be slaughtered by his soldiers while their mothers stood by weeping and wailing for their children. What has become known as "The slaughter of the infants" probably took place in the final year of Herod's reign.

Herod the Great and a number of his descendants heard the clear presentation of the gospel. Paul spoke with Felix and Drusila and with Agrippa II, but as far as we

know, no descendant of Herod became a Christian. Herod and his descendants paid dearly for their wickedness. They lost their kingdoms, their reputations, their lives and their posterity. Humanly speaking, Herod the Great accomplished much, but today, the name of Herod is associated immediately with the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem.