

The Traditions of Men in the Churches of Men

Are Traditions of Men Really “Neutral” in God’s Sight?

The truth is that these traditions that we’ve held so dear have done massive damage to the Body of Christ. They have become a comfortable substitute for the Headship and Lordship of Jesus Christ in His Church.

Jesus answered and said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men...” (Mark 7:6-8).

Jesus Himself continually violated the seemingly “harmless” traditions and “expedients” knowing full well that it would stir the religious indignation of His religious leaders. One example:

And as He spoke, a certain Pharisee asked Him to dine with him. So He went in and sat down to eat. And when the Pharisee saw it, he marveled that He had not first washed before dinner. But the Lord said to him, “Now you Pharisees make the outside of the cup and dish clean, but your inward part is full of greed and wickedness. Foolish ones! Did not He who made the outside make the inside also? But rather give alms of such things as you have; then indeed all things are clean to you. But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like graves which are not seen, and the men who walk over them are not aware of them.” Then one of the lawyers answered and said to Him, “Teacher, by saying these things You reproach us also” (Luke 11:37-45).

Notice how simple it would have been to have just gone ahead and washed his hands like the religious leaders wanted Him to. Doesn’t showing a little Christian love and courtesy and patience dictate that we “go the extra mile”?

What could it hurt? “We have to meet people where they are” and be “all things to all men,” don’t we?

Actually, you know, Jesus *is* the full personification of love—HE and HE ALONE is our definition of what Christian love and patience and courtesy are. “All things to all men?” Only the life of Jesus can define what “all things to all men” really means to the Father. And Jesus did many things like this seemingly rude religious-tradition-busting dinner event. Other times, Jesus and the disciples went through the grain fields on the Sabbath Day and purposely, in the sight of the religious critics, devastated their *interpretation* and binding of what had begun as a genuine principle of God. These sincere “experts in the Law” had put themselves in opposition to God Himself by the way that they *applied* Scripture. And Jesus took it right to them, with no allowance for their man-made interpretations. Why? We hope to discover the answer to this question as we continue. Be prayerful!

The amount of ritual that Jesus developed as He walked the streets with His Twelve friends is just *exactly* the amount of ritual that He intended for His Followers of today. The Twelve, well trained in what Christianity was and was not to be, were then to lead the 3108+ new Christians into the Life of Christ after the Day of Pentecost, into the fullness of their life with Jesus. What they brought to the growing multitudes of those that had committed their lives to the Son...is the right amount of ritual and pre-programmed choreography (“order of worship,” “men to serve list,” etc.) for us also. And, the truth be known, even with many thousands of members in one “congregation” of the church of Christ of the Bible, there isn’t even a hint of any programs, ritual or gimmicks. There was no organizational framework—at least the way we have done it—IBM or AMWAY style. Not without verse-plucking and an active imagination. Once again, our man-made additions to God’s Church, often referred to as “harmless traditions”, have effectively blocked (along with lack of personal holiness, infrequent faith-walking, and socially acceptable complacency) *most* of God’s desired activity on this planet since sometime even before 100 AD.

Though we have drifted far away from the best ways of Jesus, these programs and gimmicks and hierarchies have at least been something to hang on to for these many generations. Some would rightly argue that most of the “fruit” that we truly have had in our churches has been the product of these externals, hierarchies and programs. So true. And children do need rules and an external framework to operate from. Crippled men do need crutches and wheelchairs. But what if the children grew up? And what if the shriveled and atrophied Body was healed? And what if the church matured into the Stature of the Son...?

Food For Thought...and Digestion!

Some Religious Vocabulary That Is Actually Non-Existent in the Bible (Poor Translations Teach Shallow or Wrong Concepts)...

“CHURCH”	“Ministry”	“Baptism”
“Religion”	“Pastor”	“Prayer”
“Christ”	“Apostle”	“Salvation”

While these words are commonplace in today’s Christendom, and the translations of the Bible that we have in our language do, in fact, use these words, I’d like you to think with me for just a moment. What if the words that Jesus spoke to the multitudes, and the words that Paul wrote to the churches of his day conveyed an entirely different meaning than that which we hear or read today? The word “gay,” for example, doesn’t mean what it used to mean, does it? The “gay nineties?” You get the point. The religious system of today has (more by inheritance than overt deception, for sure) adopted a vocabulary of ecclesiastical (churchy), poorly translated, or “transliterated” words from the Bible. Unfortunately, these words do not represent at all what Jesus, or Paul, or the others had in mind when they spoke them or wrote them. As you read your Bibles, henceforth, try to hear what *they* heard, rather than hearing these religious terms in their degenerated meanings of the present day. Deal? Look into it—it’s a fun and challenging search for Truth.

Some Foundational Concepts of Today’s Religious World—
That are Non-Existent in the Church of the Bible

Worship Services	Sunday School
Sermons	Christian Colleges
Hiring and Firing Preachers (resumes, tryouts, interviews)	Choirs

Sunday as *the* special Day

Men chosen in advance for Christian Meetings to pray, preach or lead singing etc., etc., etc., etc....

A Touch of History... Paul Didn’t Carry A King James, Preach Sermons and Go to Bible Classes and “Services”

Church Buildings..... The original roots of christian “church

buildings,” seems to have been little sooner than 320 AD when Emperor Constantine decided that all of the pagan religions had Temples, so his new god, Jesus Christ, should have Temples also. The archaeologists have found no remains, whatsoever, of anything that could be construed as a Christian religious structure during the lifetimes of Jesus, or of the Twelve, or for 200 years thereafter. This is remarkable in light of the fact that virtually all of the tens of thousands of new converts to Christianity grew up “going to church”—either going to the Jewish Temple or Synagogues, or going to Pagan Temples. It would have been the most logical and natural thing in the world for Christians to build large buildings (as men do today) to have “worship services” in. But they didn’t. For two centuries. Why not? Because the concept of “going to Church” on a special day at a special place is totally opposed to the very essence and substance of Jesus and the Church of the Bible that He died to establish.

Take a few moments to pray through some thoughts with me that are at the very core of what Jesus brought from Heaven to Earth...a Fellowship with the Godhead in His Church. It could change you forever. And it’s exciting too!

“However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: ‘Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the Lord, or what is the place of My rest?’” (Acts 7:48-49)

“And the twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass. But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Revelation 21:21-22).

There is God’s heart. And His church is still to be “according to the pattern,” “on earth as it is in Heaven.” A true, vital living Community (Church) of Believers that happens to own, at the moment, some structure with a roof on it, is not the issue here at all. That really has nothing to do with what we’re considering here. We’re just desiring to see clearly this “christianity” that “has a form of godliness” but denies the reality of it in their corporate or individual lives.

Again and again the Word of God testifies to a Glorious new Way. The new church in the city of Ephesus, by way of example, was facing a severe challenge. That city was graced with the overshadowing presence of one of the seven wonders of the world, the Temple of Diana. The prevailing denomination in their town (from which many of them were no doubt converted to Jesus) had the best church building in the world. How could the christians ever compete with that?! Paul spent much of his letter to them raising the “eyes of their hearts” to see the awesome Vision of a Kingdom, and a “church

building” that can only be seen with eyes of the Spirit (Jn. 3:3,8; 1Cor. 2:8-16; Mat. 11:25-27)! Oh, that “new and living way” far surpasses anything that could be contained in buildings built by mere men. God is making YOU into a Habitation, a House for His Glory! Don’t you be so impressed with mere architecture of men; you are “living stones”—quarried from the same mega stone as Jesus Himself!

“He raised us up together, and made us sit together [now] in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...” (Ephesians 2:6).

“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19-22).

(See also Mat. 24:1-2; Jn. 2:18-22; Mk. 14:58; 1Cor. 3:9-10; 1Pet. 2:1-12; Isa. 51:1-2; Jn. 14:1-3, 14:15-21)

WE ARE HIS TEMPLE!!! We are His Mansion! We are the only Christian Church Building that there will ever be! People...not places and times. We’ll be at places and times, at times, but if we *revolve* around them, something is seriously amiss. It’s not His Church, His Kingdom if it is subject to, or described by, a certain place at a certain time!

*“Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming in such a way that scientific study [“parateresis”] could detect; nor will they say, ‘Here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is **within**, in the midst of, all of you” (Luke 17:20-21).*

*“And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. **But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.***

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:29-34).

*Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, **the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship***

what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:21-24).

“But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain” (Galatians 4:9-11).

How precious and awesome it is to see what God has really done for us and in us, and to live that to the max. Revolving around pre-set times and places and agendas of men instead of allowing the Head of the Church, Jesus Himself, to direct our lives and gatherings is to lose a glorious inheritance. Now, we feel the need to hedge our bet about having “a good worship experience” by preparing clever, compelling speeches (from the Bible, of course) days or weeks or years in advance, and pre-planning the songs and liturgy and the players involved in the staged drama of the “Worship Service.” It was never God’s idea to have a Christianity that is primarily defined by pews, sermons on Sunday to a well-dressed audience, “Bring Your Neighbor Sundays,” committees, professional religionists—“staff” employed by a church to be their leaders, or any such thing. And over time we have seen the result of this thing, which is far removed from the ways of Jesus and the Twelve, and the Church that knew them. The lives of men and women, girls and boys are needlessly left as easy prey for the pressures of the world and the attacks of satan. There really is that much at stake. The *real* thing is a church, as Christ Jesus said, that “the gates of Hell cannot withstand.” The programs and traditions have not worked. Only Christ expressed in His People—a church truly “joined and knit together by every supporting ligament,” a Kingdom of Priests, a Family functioning in *His* way rather than man’s can ever blow away the powers of Darkness.

As we venture back to taking a rational look at religious history, to see how we got where we are, we find that the “church building” kind of christianity took a new leap in the 1500’s. The Protestants took over the empty Roman Catholic Temples after Luther’s Reformation and used them in virtually an identical way as the Roman Catholics. Quoting the apostle Paul, “It is the same now.” Some much-needed “reforms” were incorporated during Luther’s lifetime. This is beyond question, and we need to be grateful that men like Luther were willing to risk their lives to challenge the jealously guarded man-made religious power-structure of their day. Nevertheless, a considerable amount of baggage, which is still controlling most of the religious scene to

this day, was carried along from Luther's days as a monk.

The Church that Jesus built (and is building) is not a "here or there," time and place related Kingdom—as all the other world religions, and Judaism, have been.

Does that mean *less* activity, *less* fruitfulness, and *fewer gatherings* in the Church? *NO!!! Much, much more!* God allowed the crutches of religious good intentions and promotion of God's Cause by men's means for a time because of the hardness of our hearts. "But it was not so from the beginning!" God gave the "children" a Saturday "holy day." He gave us Jesus Christ, *the "Sabbath Rest"* (Heb. 4:1-11; Mat. 11:25-30). *Every day*, whether apart or when we're all gathered together, is equally incredible when we're really "seated with Christ in Heavenly Realms," "living and moving and having our being in Him." When we live fully in Him, the crutches of tradition, rote predictability, days and times, and imaginative agendas are *limiting* compared to what might happen without them amongst the Royal Priesthood. God's People are awesome when they are set free to live His Life out Together rather than to simply study it and sing about it!

Could it be that unregenerate and uncommitted men and women are generally the ones who must *demand* a "here or there Kingdom" with times and places on the calendar, and a schedule of what will happen when (or if) they get there? Why would they have a vested interest in ritual or traditions or predictability? Because "seeking first the Kingdom" is a hassle! Possibly pursuing God's Life and His Gatherings "daily in public and from house to house" isn't convenient enough to accommodate any 20th Century idolatrous lifestyles?

This is God's way, a Holy Nation seeking first the Kingdom, with Jesus living inside of them:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42-47).

The only "cultural" aspects of the above passage are those of the "aliens," "foreigners," "pilgrims," and "strangers" that had been translated from selfishness into "the Kingdom of the Beloved Son." Purely and simply, those that have

Jesus Himself living inside of them will “walk as Jesus walked”—“consumed with zeal for the Father’s House.” Just live out Luke 6:1-14:35 and you’ll end up with something very much like Acts 2! Can you think of any good reasons *not* to live for Him who died for you? Me neither. Let’s do it!

Other Interesting Origins...

Sunday School—1840, USA

(Now, we feel sorry for a church without a “Sunday School.” Some say, “When they get bigger they can be a real church like the one Peter and John were part of...one with a ‘Sunday School’ and ‘Children’s Church.’” Actually, Sunday School is a very recent man-made concept to “classroom-ize” that which Jesus and the Apostles *purposely* brought *out* of the classroom mentality of the Jews and the Greeks!)

Pews—Dark Ages, Roman Catholic

Pulpits—600 AD: Roman Catholics; 1520 AD: Martin Luther

Stained Glass—circa 800 AD

Seminaries—1300 AD

(to “train” men for the “ministry”—totally foreign, as such, to the ways and teaching of Jesus and the New Testament. In the Kingdom of Jesus, men are raised up in the crucible of Life, *never* as “test-tube”/classroom leaders.)

Christian Colleges—1640 AD

(to provide “christian education”)

Sunday Morning Dress Up—Dark Ages

(Neckties—evolved from men competing to see who could wear the fanciest napkin at dinner. High heels evolved, say the archaeologists and National Geographic, from Egyptian butchers not wanting to walk around in the remains of their occupation.)

Bear in mind there is nothing wrong, in and of itself, with “nice clothes” or neckties or heels. Yet expecting “nice clothes” for “Sunday Morning Services,” believe it or not, clashes with both the teaching and the lifestyle of the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ.

“Well if you’d dress up to go to your uncle’s funeral, why wouldn’t you dress up to go to church?”

While that sounds logical to the middle-class 20th Century American and European mindsets, it was not and is not the way of Jesus, or the Church

that He established, to “dress up” to “go to church.” He didn’t, they didn’t, and we needn’t.

I know that all of this sounds strange, in light of all that we have all grown up seeing in Christendom. Remember though, we are not seeing the *results* of the Church we read about in the Bible either, are we? This is not simply trivia! We have been anesthetized by the seemingly harmless traditions of men, and it is time to put childish ways behind us! (Mk. 7:13, 12:38-40). As the Apostle Paul wrote, don’t allow anyone to judge you as you live in the Liberty of the Gospel of Jesus (don’t be contrary, of course, but see things the way God sees them).

Here are yet a few more to marvel at:

Preachers, Pastors (as main speakers, MC’s, or corporate heads at church)—1520 AD. Luther used converted ex-priests to continue to “bury the dead,” perform marriage ceremonies, and, during his Protestant version of Sunday Mass, to deliver speeches, or “sermons.” Can you see the similarities? My, my.

Special Collars for “Clergy”—Of course Jesus denounced the practice of wearing special garb to draw attention to one’s religiousness or credentials all the way back in His day. More recently, some sources indicate that we owe a debt to the Methodist “Circuit Riders” in the American frontier days. Apparently, as they rode from camp to camp on horseback preaching to whoever would listen, these “Circuit Riders” came to have a trademark of wearing sweat bandannas around their mouths and noses. They would then slip the sweatbands down around their necks when they stopped to preach. Thus, it seems, the modern “clergy collar” was born. Silly, aren’t we?

Steeple, Bells, Altars, Mission Boards, Worship Services (as such), “Joe Schmoe Ministries, Inc.”—Need we go on?

None of these things characterized Christianity in the First Century. In fact, they put roadblocks in the way of our knowing in our own experience the *Life* of those first Believers, as a “Kingdom of Priests.”

I need to re-emphasize again and again a point that will cause some to shout “Hallelujah” that didn’t even know that word was in their vocabulary, and cause others to snarl and fail a blood pressure test. Most of Christendom today has been robbed by these props and inherited Roman Catholic hierarchies and knows little more than some bible verses and how to be an audience and do some programs and committees. If the Creator of all of the

Galaxies was really involved in our organizations, it couldn't help but be far more evident than it is.

While the “props” mentioned above might seem harmless, try to envision what your church would be like without *any* of them. When you imagine that where you are, do you end up with the Power of the Church in the Book of Acts (*they* had none of these things)—or do you end up with a disjointed mess? If you were to remove all of these props, would there be anything left of your church? If your church couldn't be sustained and even increase in Oneness and the Power of God without the props of programs, buildings, hired men, Boards, and regularly scheduled meetings with pre-arranged choreography, then it is built on the wrong Foundation. While the systems and hierarchy and form are foreign to the church of the Bible (even as it grew to 15,000 plus members in one congregation!), this is the concept that virtually all unbelievers and, tragically, the vast majority of Believers, have of 20th Century Christianity. Brothers, it ought not be so!

In truth, most of what we cling to is only necessary because of lack of relationship with Him, the Reality, the “soma,” of all that God ever wanted to do in you, and in His Church (Heb. 8:1-10:25; Col. 2:16-17). When we truly *know Him*, our security and minute-by-minute direction is *relational*, rather than *conceptual*. The record of the action of the Spirit-Empowered Church that we call “the Book of Acts,” was written about, and to (Acts 1:1) Theo-Philus—“*Lovers of God*,” not Theo-Logians. The record of His Glorious workings amongst mere men was not written to, or intended for, Theo-Logians (lovers of logic about God). You may need to ponder that one. To be truly free, your life in Christ, your Christianity, must be relational—a love affair, not conceptual.

Now that points us to the solution, doesn't it! It is *not* that we now adhere to a *new* doctrine of no ritual (though the ritual must be destroyed in order to learn to trust God and function under the current Headship of the Lord of the Church). Rather, we desperately need to be healed of the emptiness of our 20th Century idolatry of running after career, suburban homes, IRA's, social standing, college diplomas, laziness, television and meaningless (or wicked) “entertainment” for our flesh, craving for information, craving for comfort, and countless other sloppy idols in our lives. Only then can we see the world and the Church “no longer after the flesh”—when the idols are torn down that blind us to Truth (Ezek. 14:3). Only then can we enjoy Jesus and the full Life of Glory that He Pioneered and left for us! (Heb. 3:1, 12:1-2; Jn. 17:5,22; Lk. 12:32; Mat. 16:19, 13:43, 13:52).

Contrast that with what Jesus left for those walking in “form” rather than in Him: Matthew 21:43, 23:13, 23:38. Not good.

May I end with a section from another writing? This has been brief, and only meant as a stimulus for further prayer and consideration. *Remember, if you react to this out of a “new concept” mentality, “the final condition will be worse than the first.” Only out of outgrowing the children’s clothing will we find God’s Will. Otherwise, if we simply curse and strip off the child’s clothing, we will only have a naked, vulnerable child. The crippled man has a desperate need for the wheelchair, the wheelchair ramp, the special parking places, and the special bathrooms. How much better, though, to heal the man—than simply improve the high-tech devices (programs, gimmicks, hierarchies) that generate a simulated freedom and life?!*

Moses ushered in an era of places and things and times and form, “because of the hardness of our hearts...but *from the beginning it was not so!*” Let’s “call a spade a spade”—and go on!!!

There’s HOPE!

What then does the Kingdom of God really look like? What will a church **today** walking in God’s Presence and full of Grace look like? How can I recognize the Spirit of Christ, and His best Way for His people and for me?

Jesus’ Bride, His Church. She’s a special Lady, a “Bride PREPARED for the return of the Groom,” the King of Glory. She’s “a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and without blemish.” She is an equal yoke for Jesus—compassionate, yet filled with fury towards hypocrisy; sensitive, yet relentlessly pursuing the completion of Her Father’s business. *This is the church that Jesus bought with His very Blood...*

She’ll be a church that is not bound by time and place, but “daily in public and from house to house.” She’ll be “joined and knit together by every supporting ligament,” everyone members of one-another,” “confessing sins one to another,” “admonishing one another daily so that none are hardened by the deceitfulness of sin,” always loving and serving and “bearing one-another’s burdens” in joy and thanksgiving. And a few tears. Her corporate gatherings will only be the overflow of what is happening on the streets and in the homes of all of her people. “Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own.”

The church will be characterized by “mega power” and “mega grace.” Sin will be exposed and eradicated with “ever-increasing Glory” in the lives of those

in the church. Captives will, at long last, be set FREE. The singing of songs to our God won't be written in a menu printed a week in advance, but will flow out of what God is doing in our midst at the moment. Watch out! Those joy-filled, faith-filled Saints of His may even erupt into song in the Burger King parking lot as the church descends on the restaurant for a meal. What's real in one place must surely be real everywhere! (That New Wine, that Living Water has strange effects, you know. It's just Biblical, normal, filled-with-Jesus Christianity!)

Together, with intimacy of relationships, we'll *LIVE* as our Lord did. Jesus, the Christ of God, now lives within us, individually and as a People (Col. 1:26-27, 3:4; Gal. 2:20; Acts 17:28; Eph. 5:18; 1Jn. 2:6; Rom. 8:9).

This passage is the Eternal pattern of the church Jesus established, and is for every generation that will walk with Him, by His Spirit:

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to proclaim good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.

“And they shall rebuild the old ruins, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the ruined cities, the desolations of many generations.

“You shall be named the Priests of the Lord, men shall call you the Servants of our God” (Isaiah 61:1-7, Luke 4:18-19).

Now, God's version is better than man's any day, isn't it?! And such churches do actually exist! If you'd like to get in on it, rest assured, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” Will you “go for it” no matter what everyone else is doing? Will you pay that price? I know you will. It's entirely worth it.

“Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be GLORY in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen” (Ephesians 3:20). AMEN?

Epilogue

It has been the hope of every broken-hearted God-loving man and woman that one more good sermon, one more “new and improved” program, a new church building, or new elders being installed will heal the wounds and disappointments of their churches. Sincere, God-fearing disciples of Jesus are overwhelmed at their helplessness as the divorce rate in their churches is statistically equal to that of the world, rather than non-existent, as God has charged. They watch in horror as over 60% of their teens are admittedly engaging in pre-marital sex by age 15. In spite of the staggering proof that these institutional churches and other para-church organizations are not living in the fullness of Power and Love and Holiness of our God, some still relentlessly and passionately defend the status quo. Motives for clinging to traditions often include fear of rejection, fear of failure, fear of job loss (for clergymen—usually the primary opponents of leaving ritual and hierarchy behind), pride, or family heritage. Watch for these hidden motives in those that are angered by some of the thoughts offered here. If you burst the bubble of complacency and religious hypnosis, you’ll surely encounter such opposition, as Jesus did! Be ready for it, answering in wisdom and love. But the days of pretending are past. We’ve got to move on with our God into all that He has planned for us!

The Prophet Isaiah declared that the Word of God would “not return void.” Jesus elaborated further and with powerful implications. Our Lord taught us that there was yet *ONE* thing that could make null and void the Word of God in your life:

“Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that” (Mark 7:13).

And finally...

“Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised!” (Hebrews 6:9-12).

A World Without Towns

(an allegory)

Imagine for a moment that towns do not exist. Centuries in the future the world is such that none of the populace has ever personally known or experienced what life in a town is all about. Life has become up-town, impersonal, and institutional.

In this generation, historical accounts of what towns used to be like, when men were men, and people and families were more than zone units, are all that remain.

Stop and imagine with me for a moment what it would be like to live in this world without towns.

Suppose now that a group of people in that generation decided to change things and make things like they used to be. They decided to “restore the town” and reestablish the “town” as the functioning unit of community life. It would be called “Anytown.” It must be just like towns used to be. The first priority, naturally, was to go to the archives and study and study and study to learn everything they could about towns.

Based on their research, they committed together that they would restore “town life” in their generation. Together they built a make-shift town out of cardboard and wood scraps, complete with a grocery, restaurant, hotel, houses, a bank, a school, a general store, and even a little police station.

These dedicated men and women devoted themselves to the task of restoring true “town life” to a lost and townless world. They decided that for an hour every day, they would practice “town life.” The man who played the grocer (he was chosen to be a grocer, but that’s not who he really was deep down inside) dug up a few vegetables for his little store. The bank teller (his mom and dad had always thought that he would have a lot of money some day) got a few dollars for his bank. And the teacher (he had always wanted to be before crowds and be looked up to) got a few books, and a couple of unsuspecting children, for his school.

The policeman, in restoring his office “by the book,” ran into a little more trouble (authority figures always have to stretch a little further in cardboard towns). Like towns, guns did not exist anymore, either. But that was okay. Where there’s a little 22nd Century ingenuity, there’s a way. He did some research in the original language and found a way out of the predicament. He located a dusty book that recorded the fact that in Britain in the 1980’s, policemen (known as Bobbies) didn’t use guns; they used billy clubs. In

context, it was clear (to him) that policemen only needed guns in earlier centuries to establish themselves as authority figures. After that, he decided to decide, society had “advanced” such that they did not need guns to “confirm” their authority anymore. The other countries in the 1980’s that still used guns were obviously, therefore, backward countries and uncivilized. In context. Thus the dilemma was resolved. The gun was cultural, an expedient. He could do it the way that was most convenient to his situation.

As a side benefit, he could also now put on seminars and hold meetings for would-be policemen since all of his studies of the original had made him something of a scholar.

And so, growing crowds of sincere men and women went everyday, religiously, to their cardboard town and practiced “town-life.” As the townspeople purchased the grocer’s cucumbers and lettuce, the grocer ran to the bank with the proceeds from his sales. The policeman then stood guard to keep the grocer from being robbed. The schoolmaster was busy teaching, of course. For at least the hour that town was in session each day, everyone tried (within the bounds of reason) to use the vocabulary of the century of “town-days.” And do their town-jobs well enough.

This all proved to be quite a popular pastime for more and more people. Certainly there were difficulties upon occasion, but that’s to be expected. Some might say that all of the “new and improved” cardboard towns that sprang up came from division or ambition. Most felt more comfortable with the idea of “pursuit of truth,” “growth,” and “town planting.”

One day a man from the past, from a real town, showed up. He watched as the men in this town of props diligently carried on their business. With great seriousness they rushed here and there as if everything depended on the outcome of their every conversation and business transaction. After all, this matter of restoring “town-life” is most serious. The man from the past was heartbroken, bewildered, amused, and angered all at the same time. What was this all about? Restoration of “town-life”—this?

He was so anxious and excited to teach them that there was so much more to town-life than propping up the externals to look the same as a town! All of the book learning they had done about his era had only served to provide a substitute that *seemed* to fit all of the categories of “town-life” component by component...yet without the Life behind them.

This newcomer to “town” was just too critical to suit the “townspeople.” Things were pretty comfortable. Kind of like family. “Sure, there are a few problems, but couldn’t he just work from within the system to help instead of

being so confounded holier than thou?” they said to one another in whispers as they passed in the streets. “We know for a fact that we are really a town.” They had all the proof they needed!

“Is there anything wrong with banks having money?!” they objected.

“Aren’t there real vegetables in the grocery?!” they asked.

“Aren’t there real books in the school?!”

(As they envisioned the outcome of the newcomer’s challenge if he was not silenced, their questions grew more intense.)

“Try to take some money from the bank and see if the policeman’s billy club is fake!” they jeered.

“Listen, buster,” some said, “if you don’t like the way we build, just start a building here yourself. Make a fire station, if you’d like. You know where the cardboard is. Instead of criticizing so much, why don’t you build along with us? Are you better than everyone else?”

Needless to say, the stranger went away saddened and confused. And the “townspeople” continued faithfully to “go to town” every day at each appointed time, each and every opportunity, whenever the doors were opened. Faithful unto death. Decently, and in order.

You see, the cloak of fear, and pride, never allowed them to see the difference between “going to town”...and being a town.

May the men in this town teach us not to confuse reality with historical knowledge. May we be determined not to settle for less than the full expression, inside and out—and never just an accurate simulation and well-oiled scaled model. The scholarly detail work of the props does not a town, or a church make. Nor does talking in the lingo of town-life or studying towns compare to the experience and joys and benefits of town-life. Or Life in God’s Kingdom. The benefits and power of true Life will *never* exist as long as our town, or our churches, remain only high-tech, detailed props. Don’t be satisfied to walk through the wax museum. Step into the substance of that Life with all your heart! Settle for no “logical explanations,” or guilt trips about being patient for another ten generations or so. Powerful speeches from an orator behind a pulpit is not a substitute for a true expression of God’s Heart for His People in this day (Eph. 3:10...“now”). May God bless and help us all as we seek to be his People, a Bride that has “made herself ready for the return of the Groom,” our Glorious Lord, Jesus Christ. Praise His Name!

-C.Z., N.B., M.P.