

January 18, 2009

### The State of the Dead and the Christian Hope of Resurrection

It has now been three weeks since my father died and I've been pretty busy going through his papers, etc. and putting things in order together with my mother. It has been a time of quiet reflection for myself about the life of a man whom I loved and whom I believe that I will see again at the resurrection of the just on the day of Christ's second coming and with whom I will share an inheritance in the future kingdom of God. On the Sunday night Dec. 28 that he died I remember looking at him lifeless on his bed. The stark reality of the words of James 2:26 rang through my mind over and over:

"For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead" (James 2:26 HCSB).

No verse could have been a better summary of both my father's entire life and his present state in death. His life was built on the simple truth of a "faith expressing itself through love" (Gal. 5:6 NIV, TNIV). But at the end of his life when he no longer had any strength to give he expired, gave up his spirit, and died. My mother was at pains that her minister did not use the common language of "passed" or "passed on" at his burial or funeral service but rather "died". Her minister was glad to accommodate her since, I believe, this also more closely followed his own beliefs.

So what do I believe about death? First, I believe that death is real and not the "passing" from one stage of "life" to another stage of "life". Such ideas are completely unbiblical and have come into Biblical theology and the beliefs of people in churches through Greco-Roman, pagan, and new-age thought over the centuries. In the Bible, however, death is a "foe" and is specifically called "the last enemy" which is yet to be destroyed. Simply put, death is death and not life. And, it is not good, but evil. And yet, the New Testament also promises Christians that not even "death" can "separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8). And so, those who are dead "in Christ" are not forgotten by God; instead, they "rest" in Christ and "await" the resurrection because "whether we are awake or asleep we will live together with him" at his return (1 Thess. 5:10 NIV, cf. NLT).

This has actually been the principle belief of Christianity since its very beginning. The question, however, arose long ago as to what happens between death and resurrection. This period of time eventually came to be called "the intermediate state" - that is, intermediate between death and resurrection. Despite many varied and often opposing opinions through the centuries as to what happens during this time, the Biblical answer is simple and, at least for the most part, clear. For the believer in Christ, at death, the "spirit" - life principle - is committed to God and Christ in heaven and the believer "falls asleep" in Christ until the day of Christ's return (Acts 7:54-60, 1 Thess. 4:13-18, 1 Cor. 15, etc.). The dominant Old Testament and New Testament picture presents death as a state of unconsciousness for the believer in "Sheol" - the realm, or state, of the dead. For OT and NT believers alike death was real, not the passing from one stage of life to another. Death was death and not life. It was only the promise of the justice of God and a future resurrection of the just and the unjust, when God's people would finally be vindicated and evil be destroyed, that gave believers hope and comfort. As the apostle Paul, in accordance with his ancestral faith, stated,

"But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down in the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man." (Acts 24:14-16).

However, it was only Christ's resurrection from the dead that made this hope vivid and real for the NT people of God (II Timothy 1:8-10). God's promised resurrection began with him and he is the prototype for all believers who will also one day follow after him in being raised to life and immortality. He is "the firstborn from the dead" and "the firstfruits of those who will rise from the dead." It is because he lives that we can now live "in him" - in faith, hope and love. And, it is also because he now lives, that though we may one day die, we will also live again "through him" and "with him" forever. This is my comfort and hope for my father. He is now dead, asleep in Christ, and will one day rise to receive the gift of eternal life - life of the age to come - in the future kingdom of God after Christ's second coming. Let this be the comfort and hope for us all. As the apostle Paul said so well,

"Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words." (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

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See also: The Biblical Hope and The Hope of Glory

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January 31, 2009

### **The Human Race and the New Man (humanity) in Christ**

January has been an interesting time in American politics with the inauguration of the first black American President of the United States, Barak Obama. I was fortunate to be able to watch the entire inauguration ceremony on television since my school was called off due to snow. Irrespective of one's political views it is certainly remarkable to see the United States progress as a society to the point where a black man can be elected to the highest office in the U.S. government. Growing up in the American South near the end of the so-called Jim Crow era when legal discrimination in the South was the norm it would have been difficult then to have predicted such an occurrence in my lifetime. But the South and, America in general, have changed dramatically since that period of time. Racism still exists, of course,

but there is far less of it than even a couple of decades ago. In fact, I would say that ironically racism is much more prevalent in large northern American cities and in many other countries than it is in the American South today.

Biblically, the concept of race falls short on two counts as having any intrinsic significance. First, all people are descended from one man and one woman - Adam and Eve. As the Apostle Paul stated,

"From one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live." (Acts 17:26 NIV)

Thus, the only real "race" is the human race and in that sense all people are equal before God. All other so-called "races" are sub-categories of this larger one and are, on the whole, bogus because of our common ancestry from Adam and because of intermarriage through the centuries. In fact, much of what is thought of as "race" is really "ethnicity" - that is, commonality on the basis of common history, culture, language, etc. There is certainly no "pure race" in terms of blood-lines and there are no races that are more intrinsically more worthy than others before God. Instead, as human beings who are created in the image of God all people have the same intrinsic value to God as all others and are, on that basis, to receive the same respect and dignity due to all. They should be judged by their fellowman - and will one day be judged by God - "not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character" - as Martin Luther King Jr. famously said. (cf. Rom. 2:5-11).

Second, as a result of God's redemptive work in Christ all differences amongst God's people - political, economic, racial, ethnic, gender, etc. - are done away with "in Christ". As Paul's Letter to the Galatians puts it so beautifully:

"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:26-28).

God has, therefore, created in Christ Jesus one "new man (humanity)" (Eph. 2:10ff NIV, TNIV). This makes for a new people of God who are "heirs together, members together, and sharers together" in all that God has promised to his people (Eph. 3:6). In the fellowship of God's people, then, there should never ever be any type of prejudice, bigotry, or discrimination on the basis of race. Instead, all are equally members of the body of Christ and all stand equally as children before God their Father.

What then about governmental discrimination on the basis of race? The Bible, science and history all demonstrate the fallacy of the concept of superior and inferior races. And, unfortunately, the last two centuries have shown just how harmful this type of racial misunderstanding can be. Therefore, just as before God, so it should be before governmental authorities: a citizen, a resident alien, a visiting foreigner, or indeed, an illegal alien, should all be judged, not by the color of their skin, but by the same laws that are common to all.

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For a very good overview of the concept of "race" see [here](#)

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*Feb. 14, 2009*

### **Valentine's Day and other Special Days**

Today is Valentine's Day in the United States as well as in various other parts of the world. As usual with such "holidays" the history of Valentine's Day is a combination of ancient paganism, Medieval Christian traditions, and modern commercialism. Apparently, it was during the time of Chaucer in the High Middle Ages that Valentine's Day took on its more amorous connotations of love between men and women.

So how should a Christian view such days and what are Christian's responsibilities in regards to them? Paul's Letter to the Romans provides a pattern that we can apply to our own situations:

"As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand."

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God." (Romans 14:1-6 ESV).

As a Christian who does not regard any particular day as any more important than any other day, I simply use a "holiday" as an occasion to join in the spirit of the day in the best sense of what it purports to signify. But I also try to point out the reality of its historical beginnings and to what degree it accords with biblical truth. This is also what I do for Christmas, Easter, etc. - all of which have similar backgrounds based on a mixture of pagan, Christian, and finally, modern commercial notions.

As for Valentine's Day, I mainly focus on this, the 25th year of marriage with my wife, Dorota. It is very meaningful for me because I take the time to be especially thankful for the life we have together. Dorota's name is derived from the Greek "Dorothea" which means "gift from God". No name could be more appropriate as far as I'm concerned, for she has truly been a "gift from God" for me. The unlikelihood that our lives would one day intersect and that we would be married makes our marriage all the more "of God". I'm thankful for every year and every day we've had to give to each other, to share with each other, and to serve our God together.

May God bless us with many, many more!

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Feb. 28, 2009

### **A Brief History of the Development of Christian Churches**

As a person who grew up in the United States of America I also grew up with the concept of freedom of religion imbedded in my life and thinking. Few Americans realize just how unique we are in this respect. The desire for freedom of religion was one of the prime factors in founding and establishing the different colonies of North America. It was also one of the founding principles of the U.S. Constitution as expressed in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights. Ever since it has been a "given" of American life. Visitors from Europe such as Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s marveled at it. And, it remains as vibrant today as at any time in our history. For most of the history of the Western World, however, this freedom has not existed.

Christian churches began as house-churches during New Testament times. They spread in this form for most the next three centuries sometimes enduring persecution in a very fierce form. These churches began with minimal structure outside of their own local leadership but increasingly grew to become more institutionalized. This institutional Church eventually became the state church of the Roman Empire in the 4th century and thus came to be called the Roman Catholic Church. From the time of the founding of the Roman Catholic Church in the 4th century A.D. until its split in 1053 A.D. there was only one institutional Church that one could be a member of in Europe. In fact "membership" was expected, demanded, and initiated through infant baptism to almost the entire population of Europe. Europe, therefore, became known as "Christendom" -that is, the land of the Christians.

In 1053 A.D. this Church split into the Roman Catholic Church which continued to be dominant in Western Europe and the Eastern Orthodox Church which became dominant in the East. Thus from 1053 to the 16th century there were two institutional Churches - the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Eastern Orthodox Church in the East. However; there was still generally only one option for the Church to which one belonged; it simply depended on whether one lived in the West or the East. With the coming of Martin Luther and the Reformation beginning in 1517 that began to change. First, after the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 it became possible to be either an "Evangelical" (Lutheran Protestant) or a Roman Catholic. This still, however, was not determined by one's choice but rather by the choice of one's local ruling prince. The Latin phrase to describe this situation was "Cuius regio, eius religio" that is, "whose the region, his the religion." This "choice" of Churches was further extended about 100 years later in the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 which ended the Thirty Years' War. Rulers could also choose Calvinism, thus making for three legal Churches in Western Europe. If one did not like the religion that the ruler chose one could always move to a different region; however, this was more easily said than done given the realities of the living conditions of those times.

Fortunately, from that point to the present Western and Central Europe have slowly - very slowly - moved towards a continent where freedom of religion became first "tolerated" and, more recently, a "right" - even in countries that have "established" or "official" national Churches - because of the European Union. During most of the history of Europe even up until fairly recent times, however,

"dissenters" - of whatever shape, form or variety - were officially persecuted. Therefore, they were often forced to meet, just like the churches of the first three centuries, in the homes of their participants.

As a teacher of both European and U.S. history I have a great love for the traditional churches mentioned above because I know of the truth that they preserved through the centuries and the many social and humanitarian services that they provided to their communities during those times. I also grew up in a tradition Presbyterian church and I am thankful for what I learned there and for the people who provided Christian examples for my own life. However, I also have a great love for the freedom, flexibility and simplicity of the house-church concept that has existed since New Testament times. For most of the past thirty-five years - since I was eighteen years old - I have been a leader of some type of house church no matter where I lived. During this time-span the house-church movement has become a world-wide phenomenon to the point that it is now estimated to make up 10% of all churches. The movement began as an attempt to return to the simplicity of first-century Christianity as presented in the New Testament Letters and Book of Acts. It has been relatively successful in accomplishing that goal and, at the very least, has provided a grassroots impetus for Christian outreach and renewal to the world-wide church of the body of Christ that never would have been accomplished through traditional Churches alone. Though I have no desire to see house-churches replace the more traditional churches, I do think that almost all churches benefit by at least having home-based Bible study fellowships, prayer groups, etc. as part of their ministry. I also think that house-churches benefit by having larger gatherings with other churches - either other house churches or traditional churches - on a regular basis. In short, I think that there are benefits in having both regular large meetings for common fellowship and worship as well as regular small meetings for more personal fellowship, prayer and in-depth study of the Bible.

Certainly, the New Testament makes it clear that where the church meets is relatively unimportant. What matters is what takes place when the church meets - that is, that God is truly worshipped and that God's people are truly built-up so as to be able to better live in a Christ-like manner. I am very thankful, however, that I have the freedom to choose which forums in which I can most effectively participate - and, to let others have that same freedom of choice as well!

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March 23, 2009

### **The Local Autonomy of Christian Churches**

One of the interesting and far-reaching results of the progression of freedom of religion is the autonomy which local churches and/or individual denominations now have in determining their own beliefs, structures, and modes of worship. To use the language of many denominations and churches, they are each in their own way self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing. No governmental body tells

them what to believe, how to support themselves, or how to govern themselves so long as they do not break laws set up for the general good of society. This situation is taken for granted by most people in America and, to a lesser extent, in other Western nations. However, it is really simply an extension of the principle about which I spoke in my previous post of "Cuius regio, eius religio" - that is, "whose the region, his the religion."

My European history and American history students usually look at me with a bit of hesitancy when I first tell them this. However, in the progression of religious freedom the "whose the region" has now progressed from the rulership of princes over principalities in the Holy Roman Empire, to individual nation-states with national established Churches, to finally, the autonomy of individual religious organizations such as denominations or local churches - including traditional churches and house-churches - in truly free societies. So in America, for instance, it is no longer the prince who determines the religion of his region. Nor does the government of either the United States, or even individual states within the United States, determine the religion of the nation or individual states. Instead, each individual denomination or local church makes that determination and they are autonomous within the property (church building, home, etc.) and religious sphere (church affairs) of that denomination or church. This is a historically incredible advance in freedom of religion and should be recognized and appreciated as such by all of those who live in such a situation. It should also be jealously guarded within the political sphere of any country who has such a situation. It is specifically this type of freedom of religion which makes for the vitality of religious life that flourishes in the United States and in other nations where this freedom exists. It is also the very freedom upon which the great advances in biblical studies and biblical understanding - now available on a massive scale - has taken place over the last couple of centuries. On the other hand, in those nations where there is an "established national church" - either officially or unofficially -religious vitality has eroded through the centuries because that established church has attempted to maintain itself, not by superiority of religious belief and practice, but by imposition of its own dogmatism in the face of competing threats to its dogmatism from without, whether religious or secular. This situation is true, amongst other places, in much of Western Europe today.

Now it is certainly true that true Christian vitality often is strengthened and enlivened in difficult situations even including persecution. However, the same effect is often produced when each autonomous religious institution must continue to uphold, defend, and refine its own beliefs and practices in the face of competing ideas in a free society. I have lived in both the former and latter situations. All things considered, I am glad at this point in my life to be able to continue to grow with God both as an individual, within my own local church, and together with the wider Church of the body of Christ in the midst of all the religious and spiritual variations, competition, and complications of a free and open society. But I am also in spiritual unity with those who don't have these opportunities and my prayers are certainly with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ as they also endeavor to live for our God in more perilous situations (Eph. 6:18!).

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*April 3, 2009*

### **Freedom of Religion and Spiritual Freedom**

One of the great ironies of life is that the political right to "freedom of religion" does not of itself bring about true "spiritual freedom" for the individual person. The Bible makes it crystal clear that all of mankind is in bondage to sin, death and the power of Satan's realm of darkness in this world (e.g. Rom. 3:9-20; Eph 2:1-2). Thus, freedom of religion is not an end in itself. Instead, true spiritual freedom for the individual person is only available through God's redemptive work in Christ. It is received by any individual person through personal faith in Jesus Christ and then, at a practical level, through the corresponding obedience that comes from that faith as a set-free believer learns to serve others in love. Thus, a person can be politically free and yet in spiritual bondage at the very same time. On the other hand, a person can be in political or social bondage and yet be spiritually free at the very same time. As the apostle Paul made clear:

"Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you - although if you can gain your freedom do so. For those who were slaves when called to faith in the Lord are the Lord's freed people; similarly those who were free when called are the Christ's slaves." (I Cor. 7:21-22 TNIV).

This paradox is of paramount importance in the New Testament and it has the effect of relativising all political, social, and economic life situations in this "present evil age" for the Christian believer in the light of the far greater "life of the age to come" which believers in Christ will receive in full after Christ's return. Thus, believers are already "free in Christ" (Rom. 8:1-17) and yet still live in the light of their future hope of the "glorious freedom of the children of God" which is still to be received in full after Christ's return (Rom. 8:18-25). Political, economic, and social freedoms - as important as they can be in the alleviation of misery and suffering in this present world - are simply overwhelmed by both the present and future freedom that is accomplished in and through Christ. This, of course, is the "good news" of the "gospel" - and it is a good news that cannot ultimately be bound by any political power of this present evil age (II Tim. 2:8-10).

The apostle Paul - himself a free-born Roman citizen with all the rights implied therein - lived his entire Christian life in the light of his "dual citizenship". First and foremost, he was a citizen of God's kingdom with its seat of government in heaven (Phil. 3:20). To his mind the Christian house churches that he established were nothing less than colonies of that kingdom of God in the midst of the darkness of the world. However, he also took seriously his rights as a Roman citizen and, above all, used those rights to help him accomplish God's purposes in spreading the "good news" of the redemption, salvation and freedom that was now freely available to all in Christ. His words to his fellow citizens in God's kingdom were bold and clear:

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another humbly in love." (Gal. 5:1, 13).

Let these words guide us as well!

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*April 12, 2009*

**Resurrection Sunday (Easter): The Historical Evidence of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the Dead**

On this Easter Sunday millions of Christians around the world celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord from the dead. This, however, is not just an event to be taken "on faith" in the popular sense of that phrase. Instead, it is an event that is also rooted and grounded in history – a history that is open to be seen by any honest observer of the historical record. In early Christian history the NT believers began a tradition of meeting regularly in their local house churches on the first day of the week, that is, Sunday. They called this day "the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10) because it was believed – based on eyewitness accounts from amongst their own members - that the Lord Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead on that day. Believing that Christ was the "firstborn from the dead" and that his resurrection marked him out as "the Son of God in power" this day came to be seen by many as a special day to meet together for "all who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours." (I Cor. 1:2; 16:1-2, Acts 20:7; See NIV Study Bible notes on all of these verses).

Though there is no New Testament requirement that Christian believers are obligated to meet regularly on this day, there can be no doubt as to this historical development of the local Christian church gatherings. The beginnings of this practice are witnessed to in the New Testament itself and it is also documented in many writings of the first few centuries after Christ. In each case they point to the significance of the resurrection of Christ in the early Christian churches. The late NT scholar Bruce Metzger sets forth the historical record about the resurrection of Christ and the beginnings of the Christian Church stemming from it in his comprehensive and outstanding book *The New Testament: its Background, Growth and Content*:

"The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is overwhelming. Nothing in history is more certain than that the disciples believed that after being crucified, dead, and buried, Christ rose again from the tomb on the third day, and that at intervals thereafter he met and conversed with them. The most obvious proof that they believed this is the existence of the Christian church. It is simply inconceivable that the scattered and disheartened remnant could have found a rallying point and a gospel in the memory of him who had been put to death as a criminal had they not been convinced that God owned him and accredited his mission by raising him from the dead.

"It is a commonplace that every event in history must have an adequate cause. Never were hopes more desolate than when Jesus of Nazareth was taken down from the cross and laid in the tomb. Stricken with grief at the death of their Master, the disciples were dazed and bewildered. Their mood was one of dejection and defeat, reflected in the spiritless words of the Emmaus travelers, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). A short time later the same group of disciples was aglow with supreme confidence and fearless in the face of persecution. Their message was one of joy and triumph. What caused such a radical change in these men's lives? The explanation is that something unprecedented had occurred: Jesus Christ was raised from the dead! Fifty-some days after Crucifixion the apostolic preaching of Christ's resurrection began in Jerusalem with such power and persuasion that the evidence convinced thousands." (Bruce Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth and Content*, p. 150ff)

Metzger's account goes right to the heart of the resurrection of Christ and the formation of the Christian Church. This Church began on Pentecost and the subsequent local Christian churches began at Jerusalem and then spread out throughout much of the Roman Empire during the course of the middle decades of the first century as recorded in the Book of Acts. At first this "good news" or "gospel" message of salvation was spread by word of mouth and presented as the fulfillment of Old Testament themes and promises. Eventually, eyewitness accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were collected, organized and written down as "Gospels" and sent to either individuals or local Christian churches for the further establishment and propagation of the gospel message. Each of these accounts – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – had their own original audience and was written in a way so as to present the good news about Jesus Christ to that original audience in a way that would be best understood by that audience. Only later were these four Gospels collected and presented together in what became known as the New Testament. Given the original individualized audiences of each Gospel it is impossible today to be sure of the details as to why certain material was chosen to be presented while other material in other Gospels was not and how that material was specifically organized from the point of view of the writers. However, there can be no doubt as to the collective historical testimony of these Gospel writers or about their collective overall purpose:

Luke, for example, states: "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:1-4 NIV).

John also is crystal clear: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may live in his name." (John 20:30-31 NIV).

Speaking with respect to the individual, yet united, testimonies of the four Gospels about the resurrection of Christ, Dr. Metzger states the following:

"Divergences in detail are certainly to be found in the accounts of the first Easter, but these are such as one would expect from independent and excited witnesses. If the evangelists had fabricated the resurrection narratives, they would not have left obvious difficulties and [apparent] discrepancies – such as those involving the number of angels at the tomb, the order of Jesus' appearances, and similar details. That the accounts have been left unreconciled, without any attempt to produce a single stereotyped narrative, inspires confidence in the fundamental honesty of those who transmitted the evidence.

"The evangelists [the Gospel writers], moreover, give the impression of being unconcerned to provide all of the evidence on which the church rested its belief. That is, they offer only a part of the proof by which belief in the Resurrection was created and sustained." (Metzger p. 150-1)

Of course, the overall presentation of the resurrection of Christ in the four Gospels is also supported by the united testimony of the rest of the NT documents including the Book of Acts, The NT Letters of Paul, Peter, John, and James, and the Book of Revelation. These each present the testimony of eyewitnesses – each in his own way – of the resurrected Christ and their writings set forth not only the historical fact of Christ's resurrection but also its theological, spiritual and practical significance for Christian believers.

The subsequent history of the Christian church in the early centuries after Christ also supports the same conclusions regarding the truthfulness of the resurrection of Christ and the vitality of the Church of Christ that followed. Christians should never be afraid of the attempts by secular scholars to cast doubts upon the historicity of the events of the Christian faith. Most of these attempts are based on the false assumption that miracles cannot occur, or at least, that written accounts about miracles cannot be trusted as part of the historical record. They, therefore, predetermine and necessarily skew the outcome of their investigation of the historical evidence. This does nothing but bolster their own preconceived opinions – and often lifestyles – that are based on their own biases and choice to not believe in God or in his Son, Jesus Christ. The true historical record, however, is overwhelmingly clear for those who desire to see it. And, it is the NT documents themselves that are, and deserve to be, the most fundamental and reliable historical witnesses of the truth that the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, is indeed the risen Christ, the Son of God. It is also this victorious "good news" that is indeed "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." (Rom. 1:16)

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This article has been filed under "Articles".

For other articles and more detailed information on this topic see:

Articles:

"The Resurrection of Christ" – the entire Vol. 6 Issue 1 of "The Unity of the Spirit"

"The Lord's Day" – Wikipedia article

"Easter" – Wikipedia article

Books:

The New Testament Documents. Are They Reliable? By F.F. Bruce

The New Testament: Its Background, Growth and Content by Bruce Metzger

The Resurrection of the Son of God by NT Wright

*May 9, 2009*

### **Church and Churches**

I have always loved churches and every time I see one today something sort of jumps in my heart. I suppose this began to a great degree because of my growing up in the American South. The Presbyterian church I grew up in was very much a part of my life. We attended church service and Sunday school regularly each Sunday. On Wednesday evenings we also often attended a pot luck supper with an informal service or other activities afterwards. I also attended kindergarten at this same church and later both Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. Many of my closest friends also went to this same church while others attended other Protestant churches such as Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist or another Presbyterian church. I occasionally visited their churches with them as well. All of these experiences were very typical of the Southern culture of those times and still is, at least, to some degree. Perhaps more than any other area of the United States, life in the South for a very large number of people still revolves around their church.

Most of these churches are wooden structures and most of them have a simple beauty about them. Many of them are also painted white. Since they are Protestant churches they are also simply arranged on the inside with pews facing a pulpit, often with pews behind the pulpit for a choir, and at times adorned with a few stained glass windows. As I've traveled around the United States and Europe in my adult life I've encountered similar churches in some places; however, most areas had much more ornate churches especially in the ascending order of Episcopal, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic. When I lived in Wisconsin for a year at the age of 19 to 20 the churches I encountered were almost all Lutheran or Roman Catholic. Oddly enough, even those Lutheran churches were more ornate than the usual Protestant churches - including Lutheran ones - that I was used to in the South. Having only been in a Roman Catholic church once by that time - for a funeral of the lone Catholic in my Junior High class who died of an accident - I was stunned to see the differences. It was a whole new world for me to see the ornate adornment and size of many of those churches in Wisconsin. Of course, having now studied, lived and traveled in Europe for almost thirty years I've come to see a European continent of churches that possess an age, magnitude, and adornment that most people in the American South could hardly imagine. The great cathedrals and churches of Europe are simply astonishing in comparison with the simple, though beautiful in their own way, churches of the American South.

One of my favorite verses in the entire Bible is found in Paul's First Letter to Timothy:

"Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing to you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth." (I Tim. 3:14 NIV/TNIV)."

I cannot think of many things more exciting and inspiring than to be a part of "the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth." In a world of multiculturalism, relative beliefs and values, and with no sure certainty about anything, it is nice to be a part of the true "counter-culture" of God's church which is the pillar and foundation of the truth. Of course, most of us know that the Greek word "ekklesia" (church) in the New Testament is never used of a "church building" as it is used today.

Instead, it refers to:

1. The local church consisting of Christians in a particular area.
2. The assembled local church.
3. The church catholic or universal - that is, the church of the body of Christ consisting of all Christian believers throughout the world who are spiritually united "in Christ".

This "church of the living God" began as a local church in Jerusalem and ultimately many thousands of local churches throughout Judea and the ends of the earth (Acts 1). These churches originally met primarily in homes and continued to do so for much of the first few centuries after Christ's ministry on earth and his death, resurrection and giving of the Spirit which began the church. Only later did these churches begin to meet in buildings which they either built themselves or else took over from pagan temples. Nevertheless, even though they started to take on elements of the cultures and religions with which they inter-mixed, most of these "churches" still continued to represent the essential elements of the Christian faith and the buildings where they met became known as "churches" as well.

Wherever I am in the world I still love to gaze at, visit, and learn about these churches - that is, the church buildings and the people they represent. This includes churches that I see in my own neighborhood and the region where I live in South or in any of the places where I visit in the United States or world. One particular highlight in relationship to this was to find that the small hotel in which my wife Dorota and I were staying in Japan a year ago actually had a small Christian church within it - a chapel that was used for Christian weddings, services, etc. This was an unexpected and delightful surprise and we immediately set out to investigate everything we could about it. In short, it had a noble Christian heritage associated with it just as is true of most churches however they may have changed through the years.

It is certainly true that the history, culture and traditions of a local community, city, region or nation are often found in their churches. To understand and appreciate the people of that area one needs to understand at least something about all that their churches represent for them. A good starting place is to appreciate the good that those churches have done and, hopefully, continue to do to whatever large or small degree. Most of these churches - with some notable exceptions - began with the noble purpose

of truly trying to help God's people. And, it is almost certain that all of our lives collectively as Christians would be spiritually poorer without them. For most of the last two thousand years these churches have been the most stable force in the societies of their times, beginning in Europe and then carrying over to America and much of the rest of the world. These churches were, and many continue to be, the center around which life in all of its most important aspects revolved. They were the spiritual, intellectual, educational, charitable, social, and often, political centers of the lives of the local communities that they represented. If for the last 35 years I have chosen to center my own church life in what I consider to be the original New Testament pattern of the earliest church - the house church - it does not in any way mean that I do not appreciate what the more traditional churches - centered in their own particular and often beautiful church buildings - have done, and do, as well.

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*June 8, 2009*

### **Church and Churches Part II**

In my last post I talked about my love for churches - both the church buildings and the people of God in the local church which meets in the church building. Just as my life revolved around "church" growing up in the American South, so it has continued to revolve around church life in my adult life. Over the last 35 years, since the age of 19, I've participated in and helped found and establish many different churches in many different places both here in the U.S. and in Europe. There has never been a time in that 35 years that my life did not revolve around helping to start, build, or establish some type of church somewhere. Most of these were house churches - that is, local groups of believers whose church life revolves around various kinds of fellowships that take place in the homes of the believers of those fellowships. In addition, I've helped start and build various types of Christian fellowships on college campuses and, now also, at the school where I teach. To me this is simply part and parcel of being a committed Christian believer during the new covenant era of salvation. This pattern for outreach and fellowship was begun by Jesus himself as recorded in the Gospels and then became the norm of his followers - based on Christ's commands to them - in the first century churches that began at Jerusalem and then moved out throughout the Roman Empire as recorded in the Book of Acts and NT Letters. As they preached the gospel message they met first in the Jerusalem temple courtyards, then local synagogues throughout the Roman Empire, and, ever increasingly, in their own homes or other similar places (e.g. Acts 1:1-11; 5:42; 28:30-31).

Throughout Christian history alternatives to the religious institutions of the day have often been necessary in order to accomplish God's purposes of teaching the truth and caring for God's people. It seems almost inevitable that almost all institutions will eventually ossify and become in need of revitalization - institutional churches are no exception. A few examples of this in history that come readily to mind were the Lollards' who followed the leadership of John Wycliffe in 14th century England,

the many Reformation churches in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries, the Anabaptists of the same period, the Great Awakening churches in America in the 18th century, and the corresponding Weslyan movement in England during the same period of time of the 1700s. In fact, the history of Christianity in America has been a continual history of just that - revitalization upon revitalization - right from its very beginnings in the Colonial era all the way down to the present day. This has been greatly aided by the U.S. Constitutional principle of separation of church and state - rightly understood. Of course, house churches or other alternative churches have also flourished in countries throughout history where persecution of Christianity existed, or exists, such as in the first century church under the Roman Empire and in modern China today.

The work of a church is a "noble work" in God's eyes and those who desire to lead a church "desire a noble task" (I Tim. 3:1ff). Arguably, good Christ-like leadership as outlined in verses such as I Tim. 3, Titus 1, etc. is the single most important factor in having a church that is truly representative of "the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth." Beyond that, it is obvious that the place where the assembled people of God in a local area meet is relatively unimportant and a good argument can be made for a central location together with various offshoots. What matters most is that God is truly worshipped, that God's people are spiritually built up, encouraged and strengthened, and that the local church - wherever it principally meets - becomes God's alternative to the world by teaching the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Much has been written and much has been discussed about what makes for an authentic church. In my view, the best standard is that set famously by Jesus Christ himself, "wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst." That certainly sounds like a NT church to me and I believe all authentic churches should be built on that simple concept laid down by Christ himself.

The church in Cary, NC which Dorota and I are a part of is Cary Christian Fellowship. We call it a "fellowship of fellowships." We have a Board of Directors (Elders) which founded the church and oversees it on a continual basis. We also have one person, Scot Hahn, who is legally ordained according to NC law and who is responsible to lead, oversee, and pastor Cary Christian Fellowship on a daily basis. We have a variety of fellowships which take place at different times and places for different purposes. First, we have one large monthly fellowship meeting in which we all come together that meets at David and Pam Hahn's homestead "out in the country" - complete with a pond and other down home "southern amenities" (most importantly David and Pam themselves!) - during the good weather months. During the cold weather months of the year we meet at David and Mary Seed's home which has a special detached addition behind their home which is a perfect setting for our larger monthly fellowship. Both of these places are wonderful places for God's people to meet exhibiting the loving and godly hospitality of their own owners who are themselves faithful patrons and pillars of our church community.

We also have two regular weekly fellowships that are, perhaps, what the rest of our "fellowship of fellowships" are built around. One of these is led by Scot in his and his wife Kristi's home. The other is led by myself in Dorota's and my home. These provide weekly continuity in teaching God's word and building up all of us within our local "ekklesia" or church. We also have several other types of fellowships that meet at various other times and places, e.g. a children's fellowship, a women's

fellowship, etc. We also stay in touch with what we consider to be our "sister church" in Krakow, Poland that is independently led by Leszek and Olga Druszkiewicz and the Polish believers there. This is a house church that Dorota and I helped to start and were privileged to be a part of back in the 1980s. We consider ourselves to still be members of it - at least "in spirit" - to this day. The believers in that fellowship are particularly dear to us and because of this we particularly pray for, love, and dearly look forward to spending time with them as often as possible. Thankfully, we are often able to do this in a wonderful small Bible conference that takes place in the Polish Tatra mountains in the summer of each year. For me personally, this Polish summer conference that has been organized and led by Leszek and Olga and the other Polish believers there now for 15 years, is always one of the highlights of my year and I will speak more about it in a later post.

I believe that each local church functions best when it is self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-governing. It can then draw on resources from, or cooperate with, other Christian groups, sources of information, or individuals as it sees fit at any given time. This local control also allows for the greatest flexibility and the ability to meet the needs of a local fellowship with its own local situations. This is our model for Cary Christian Fellowship. So while our focus is on our own local church, all of us in Cary Christian Fellowship are also involved in the outreach of God's word in many other ways in our communities. Some of these involvements are in joint cooperation with other churches or else in special situations such as school groups, etc. In this way we seek to work with fellow Christians in a cooperative way and yet to retain the unique distinctiveness of our own fellowship - both in what we believe and in our method and organization. Finally, we maintain a web-site for Cary Christian Fellowship and also help sponsor this Unity of the Spirit web-site in which we seek to support both our own fellowship as well as to play our part in supporting the church of the body of Christ as a whole throughout the world.

Let us never forget that when properly organized the local church continues to be "the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth." (I Tim. 3). This church should be a people and a place where God's love is manifested, where God's people are built up, and where God's truth is made known to the world. Indeed, God's intent is "that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:10-11).

So, what's happening in the world today? The church of the living God - wherever two or three are gathered in Christ's name!

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*July 4, 2009*

**The Meaning of Life**

When I get up in the morning each day the first thing I do is turn my thoughts to God and ask him to help me to live for him to the best of my ability throughout that day. I then spend whatever time that is necessary in prayer, Bible reading or study, and meditation on the things of God to prepare myself for that day. I am admittedly a "morning person" and I typically get up early to give myself time to do this. In fact, I've been doing this for the last 35 years of my life and it has become an established pattern and habit for me. However, whether or not one is a "morning person" it seems evident that in one way or another each of us should prepare our minds each morning - whether through a few minutes or hours - to live for God that day. Often I begin with some of my favorite Psalms such as Psalm 1 which I read in either the ESV or NIV since they preserve the original Hebrew singular representative "man" of verse 1 which, though equally applicable to both men and women, being singular retains the very personal aspect:

"Blessed is the man  
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,  
or stand in the way of sinners,  
or sit in the seat of mockers.

But his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.  
He is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
that yields its fruit in season,  
and whose leaf does not whither.

Whatever he does prospers.

Not so the wicked!

They are like chaff that the wind blows away.  
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.  
For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will  
perish."

(Psalm 1 NIV).

This Psalm has been a foundation for my life since childhood. There are few Psalms that are as straightforward, vivid, and to the point as this one, and it is not by accident that it was chosen to be placed at the beginning of the Psalter as Psalm 1. This Psalm sums up the Old Testament perspective of what makes man "blessed" in this life. Now "blessed" is a word that's thrown around a lot in popular culture as well as in popular Christianity. For a good understanding of the word "blessed" in its biblical context and for a good understanding of the entire structure and meaning of Psalm 1 I highly recommend the NIV Study Bible notes on this Psalm. Take the time to read them, study them and understand the Psalm in its original meaning and context. However, what is immediately obvious to any unbiased reader is that the "blessed man" is "blessed" precisely, and only, because his life is lived in proper relationship to God.

I've often been asked by others what is perhaps the greatest question of all, "What is the meaning of life?" My reply is always simple and straightforward, "To live for God." Now one may give the same answer in other words such as "To live in fellowship with God" or "To have a personal relationship with God", etc.; however, these are simply different ways of saying the same basic truth. Each answer may emphasize a different aspect of living for God, but the meaning is still fundamentally the same. Of course, the Bible states, implies, and assumes this answer right from the beginning in the Book of Genesis and continues with the same answer all the way through to the end in the Book of Revelation. Therefore, at any place that one may look in the Bible this answer to the meaning of life is the fundamental assumption that all of its writers begin with and either directly or indirectly present, expound and advocate.

The Old Testament sets the basis for this understanding of the meaning of life and its message carries over to become the foundation of the New Testament as well. The God of the Old Testament is the same God as the God of the New Testament and it is in the New Testament that we read of the fulfillment of God's plans, purposes and promises for mankind and the world through God's Son, Jesus Christ. The Old Testament begins in the Book of Genesis by setting up the basic relationship of man with God. In Genesis 1 and 2 God creates an inhabitable world in which man, who is created in God's image, is set up to rule over in a god-like, or godly, way in relationship with God and his fellowman. Therefore, man is first and foremost responsible and accountable to live for God according to God's standards. Second, man is responsible and accountable to live in proper relationship with his fellowman who is also created in God's image. Finally, man is responsible and accountable to properly rule over, subdue, and steward God's creation in accordance with God's original intent for it to glorify his name. Many other sections of scripture - such as Psalm 8, Job 38-40, Rom. 1:18ff, etc. - confirm this basic structure of life within God's created order which is then assumed throughout the rest of the Bible.

Any right thinking about God, about the world in which we live, about the meaning of life, and about man's place and meaning in life must conform to this structure. Apart from this world-view everything else is confusion and delusion. On the other hand, accepting this world-view gives one the basic structure of life from which all meaning is derived and through which all of life can be properly understood. It does not, however, mean that life will be easy, pain free, or that one will therefore understand all of the answers about the world, life, evil, etc. Instead, the Bible is the most realistic of all books. It insists throughout that man is a creature of God, created in God's image; but is not God himself. Therefore, man's understanding always has been and always will be limited. Man sees only a very, very small part of the entire picture while God sees the entire picture both in terms of meaning and in terms of actual reality. To pretend otherwise is to go against all experience of history, personal practical reality, and indeed, common sense itself.

Of course, many, many people do not accept this picture of reality and, therefore, reject the reality of God and the concept of "living for God" as being the answer to the true meaning of life. That, of course, does not mean that they have a better answer; in fact, it is much more fashionable these days to not have an answer. If a person is truly searching for the answer to the meaning of life then that person will, the Bible says, ultimately find it. God's created order and his own personal governance of the world operate in such a way as to providentially bring about his purposes for his people. Since we all come

from different backgrounds - much of that background being beyond our control - the paths to reaching an accurate understanding of the God of the Bible will vary widely. The person, however, who out and out rejects the existence of a personal God sets himself against God's created order which itself, the Bible makes clear, makes manifest the reality of God himself (Rom. 1:18ff). The Bible in no uncertain terms calls this person "a fool" and explicitly sets forth the error, perversion and destruction to which this point of view leads (Psalm 1, Psalm 14, Rom. 1:18ff). Invariably, people who choose this route either consciously or unconsciously turn to other gods of their own making or else they, in effect, become their own god.

It is important to note that this theme of either living for or against the one true God of the Bible has been the central theme not only of the Bible but also of history itself. It begins with the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden in Genesis 2 and 3, it works itself out in the history of the world, and it continues to be the central theme of life today. Accepting that "living for God" is indeed the answer to the meaning of life simplifies an otherwise complicated and confusing world. It brings meaning, purpose, clarity and structure to all of life's difficulties, challenges, and questions. And most importantly, it is the starting point for a lifelong relationship of coming to know - and grow with - the personal God who created mankind to live in intimate fellowship with him.

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Aug. 18, 2009

### **The Name "Christian"**

Since New Testament times if a person is to know and live for God he must come to God through his Son, Jesus Christ. This is the essence of NT Christianity and the entire New Testament revolves around it. The NT is focused on Christ because Jesus Christ was, and is, the Son of God through whom God has most fully revealed himself to mankind and through whom God has brought salvation to the world. Very simply, Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life" and through him any individual person can "come to the Father" and "know the Father" as his personal God (John 14:1-10). For those who choose to believe in, and thus follow, Christ there is no more appropriate or honorable name than "Christian".

I have always loved the term "Christian". It is a name by which I have identified myself since childhood because I was born into and brought up in a Christian family and a Christian church. The term "Christian" is biblical, appearing three times in the NT, and it is significant in several respects. First, it immediately identifies a person as a believer in, and follower of, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is also a term that immediately identifies a Christian as a member of the worldwide Christian community - a community that transcends denominational and sectarian divisions as well as local Christian churches of whatever kind. Finally, the term "Christian" focuses immediate attention on that which is central to Christianity.

When people ask me what I believe as a Christian I usually sum it up by stating the central truths of God's plan of salvation, all of which focus on Christ:

1. Believe in Christ,
2. Live a Christ-like life,
3. Until Christ's return.

There is plenty of detail to be un-packed from these central truths focusing on Christ and I have tried to do it some extent in my own booklet "God's Plan of Salvation". However, the best way to maintain unity in Christianity is to begin by focusing on these most important central truths and then working down to the details from there. Calling ourselves "Christians" helps to achieve this and it is a name that can, and should, be borne humbly, proudly, and honorably by "all who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ - their Lord and ours" (I Cor. 1:2).

One of the highlights of my summer - from amongst many - has been making the acquaintance of a young Christian scholar from California by the name of Patrick Navas. Patrick is thirty years old and is a student of history, theology, and biblical studies. He has already published a major - and massively documented - book entitled "Divine Truth or Human Tradition" which we will be reviewing later. However, in recent weeks we've had the opportunity to read some of his other articles many of which are focused on bringing unity to the worldwide Christian community by presenting the original intent and meaning of the truth of the Bible itself rather than post-biblical traditions, creeds, and institutional structures or dogmas. This, of course, is the exact purpose of "The Unity of the Spirit" web-site and we look forward to working together with him in the future and making more of his work available on this web-site. What follows is a highly recommended article which Patrick has written entitled:

"Thoughts on the Name Christian".

Do yourself a favor and delve into it. It will bring honor to the name "Christian" that we all as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ humbly and proudly bear.

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Nov. 11, 2009

### **Veterans Day**

On the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of the year 1918 the guns of the Great War - eventually to be called World War I - stopped. For many of those who experienced it the silence that followed was deafening and the new reality that was created was surreal. The armistice that was signed at that time between Germany and the Allied powers led to the end of the bloodiest, most destructive,

and most geographically far-reaching war that the world had ever seen. The political order of the world was changed forever and all of those who participated in, or who lived through, that war were also changed forever. Included in that number were many professing Christians - on all sides - including my own American grandfather. In the following year of 1919 President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed the day of November 11 a day to be celebrated as Armistice Day in honor of those Americans who served in the war.

Twenty years later on September 1, 1939 Nazi Germany invaded the Republic of Poland thus beginning what came to be known as World War II. This shattered the human illusion - perpetuated by the pacifism of Western governments in the 1920s and 30s - that World War I had, in fact, been a "war to end all wars" or a war "to make the world safe for democracy". The massive death, destruction and horror of World War II swamped that of World War I and at its end brought us into the era of the nuclear age - an age in which for the first time man had the power to literally destroy himself and the entire inhabitable world by weapons of his own making. This war also realigned the political order of the world, set the lines for the Cold War, and changed the lives of all who participated in, or lived through, it. So far-reaching were its effects that it touched all continents and all peoples of the world to a greater or lesser degree. As with World War I it also included the participation of many professing Christians including my own father, two uncles, and many, many friends and acquaintances. In 1954 President Eisenhower and the U.S. Congress changed the name of Armistice Day to Veterans Day in honor of all veterans of America's wars. In many other nations that same day of November 11 is still remembered and commemorated as Armistice Day, Remembrance Day, or by other names, in honor of veterans or veterans who died in World War I and other wars.

It is the united testimony of the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation that God has appointed man to rule justly over the earth as those who are created in his own image (Gen. 1:26ff). There is, however, no Biblical mandate for a specific type of government and we see different forms of government throughout the Bible. What is important is that it governs justly under God on behalf of its people. There is nothing more tragic than when just government of whatever kind breaks down. The foundations of orderly society are destroyed and the vulnerable of the world become the prey of corrupt rulers (Psalm 82). When necessary just government necessarily entails participating in just wars. To refuse to do so is to neglect proper governmental responsibility and to leave a nation's people prey to the destructive forces of evil and to all the injustice that follows. As a Christian believer who fervently believes in the God-ordained role of just government as well as in just war as a necessary part of fulfilling just government - I also today "give honor to those to whom honor is due" (Rom. 13:7). That is, I give honor to those who in service to the just ideals of their nations are veterans of their militaries in their nations' wars. As an American I particularly pay tribute to my fellow Americans - including many relatives, friends and even former students - who have served as veterans in wars in which America has participated over the course of the last century - the great majority of which I believe to have been just wars on behalf of the welfare of the people who were otherwise subject to greater injustice.

Above all, I give honor to those fellow-Christians who served honorably in these wars in the cause of justice, irrespective of the difficulties and imperfections of the moral, ethical or practical considerations that war often entails. War takes the complications of life in this present evil age to perhaps its highest

level; and, just as the Christian should not seek to escape from the responsibilities of life and citizenship in normal society, so he should not seek to escape from the responsibilities of life and citizenship in wartime society. The Bible is full of examples of believers who served in government and military positions such as Joseph, David, Esther, Daniel, etc. These even included service in Pagan governments of all kinds with no expectation ever stated or implied that these believers should depart from those positions - unless, they were compelled to live contrary to God's commands.

In Romans 13:1-7 the apostle Paul sets forth in plain and simple language the fullest expression of the God-ordained purposes of government and the believer's responsibility in regards to it. In fact, Paul's teaching summarizes the entire Biblical perspective and is itself a carry-over from the Old Testament perspective. On the whole, this perspective would have been a given for the Jewish faithful including Paul himself. Clearly, believers - both Old Testament and New Testament - were expected and commanded to respect, honor, obey and even pay taxes to support the purposes of just government. They thus become supporters and implicit participants in just government including its just responsibilities of promoting good and also of "bearing the sword" for the restraint and punishment of evil. Clearly this includes what we today would consider police work within our own nations, states, cities, and towns. However, it would be artificial and naive to think that such law enforcement stops at the borders of one's own nation. The upholding of justice - including the use of military force - extends beyond one's own borders when necessary. Threats to a nation's people are both internal and external. This has always been the case. In addition, true justice is justice under God and cannot be confined to a single geographical area. To the degree that a government can increase that justice it has an obligation to help do so. Ultimately, all people everywhere are responsible and accountable to God and will one day be judged by him. Government provides a temporary - though imperfect - measure of God's justice in this present evil age for the promotion of good and the restraining and punishment of evil until the time of God's final judgment when justice will fully be brought to its fullest expression.

That Paul believed in these principles and put them into practice himself is clearly shown by his own life in relationship to the Roman government of his day and his own exercise of his rights of Roman citizenship as set forth in the Book of Acts and his NT Letters. Over and over he depended upon the Roman government - including the implicit use of force if necessary - for his own protection as a Roman citizen. However, this is simply a continuation of the same perspective of government that began in the Old Testament and continues throughout the New. Of course, as in all matters of Biblical ethics the application of these principles must be made according to the given individual historical situation and according to the conscience of the individual Christian believer who is faced with real-life decisions in that historical situation. As in all matters our first responsibility is to God himself. Therefore, in matters of government responsibility - including military - if ungodly acts are demanded of Christians who are citizens of a given state by that state then our Christian responsibility is clearly "to obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29). But that is the exception, not the rule. As a rule government is instituted for just reasons and those who help carry out its just function - especially those who put their lives on the line in its cause - are deserving of the respect and honor due to them.

History, of course, will not be the ultimate judge of the justness of wars or of the justness of the acts and decisions of the individuals who fought in these wars; instead, as with all things and all people, God

himself will be the final judge. And, of course, as in all things we can be assured that God's judgment will be just in weighing both the acts and motives of the hearts of all of those involved including sincere Christian believers (I Cor. 4:1-5). Most importantly, we can also rest assured that this same God who created the world with a purpose and plan in mind was actively at work during those wars just as he has been actively at work throughout history in bringing about his own sovereign purposes for the good of his own people, his own creation, and to his own ultimate glory as a merciful, just, and all-wise God (Gen. 50:19-20; Job 42:2-3; Psalm 103:19; Dan. 4:28-33; John 19:10-11; Rom. 11:33-36; etc.).

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*Dec. 25, 2009*

### **Christmas Day and the Gospel of Life**

The Gospel of John is often called the "the Gospel of Life". It is not a biography of the life of Jesus. Instead, it is a presentation of God's plan of salvation being effected by God himself through the creative and redemptive work of his own "Word" - through which God first creates the world and through which God eventually brings salvation to the world in the human person of his unique Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. The blessings of this redemption, salvation and "life" are thus made available to the entire world and can be received by anyone who freely chooses to accept and believe "that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." The beauty of the message of this "Gospel of life" deserves to be front and center on this Christmas day when we celebrate the coming into the world of God's unique Son. Following are some key sections in the Gospel of John which present the story-line from beginning to end:

John 1:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only [Son], who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

15 (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' ") 16 Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God, but the one and only [Son], who is himself God [in his self-revelation] and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (John 1:1-18 TNIV).

John 3:

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 All those who do evil hate the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. 21 But those who live by the truth come into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. (John 3:16-21 TNIV).

John 17:

1After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. 2For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. 3Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. 4I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. 5And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. (John 17:1-5).

John 20:

30Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31 TNIV).

This is truly the "Gospel of Life"! May God bless you all in this joyous season of the year as we remember God's love as expressed through the redemptive work of his Son!

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