

December 23, 2013

The Christmas Season

The Gospels: the Good News of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God

My greetings to all in this Christmas season of the year when we celebrate the birth of God's Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Not long ago almost everyone growing up in a Western country knew the story of Christ's birth almost by heart. It was presented as a joyous event and was proclaimed and presented from church pulpits, in Christmas plays, and throughout popular culture in various ways. Though this is still true to some degree depending upon where one lives, the true significance of the birth of Christ has been greatly diminished since the true "Christ of the Bible" is, in fact, a very politically incorrect figure according to many of the popular political and cultural standards of today. Fortunately, however, the true meaning of Christ's birth still shines through the Christmas presentations of many churches and, most significantly, it is crystal clear in the pages of the New Testament itself for anyone who truly wants to understand it. One of the most beautiful summary statements of this in the New Testament is found in Paul's Letter to the Galatians:

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father'! So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, an heir through God." (Gal. 4:4-7 ESV).

Of course, at this time of year we normally turn to the pages of the New Testament Gospels to read about the events of Christ's birth. And, that for good reason, for the story is told with beauty and clarity of meaning when the Gospels are allowed to speak, in their own way, for themselves. Generation upon generation of faithful believers and searching individuals have felt liberated, comforted and touched to the depths of their hearts by the simplicity and penetrating meaning of the "good news" of the birth of Christ as presented in these Gospels. In fact, despite the efforts of many so-called scholars to deconstruct and obscure the clear testimony of the New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah of God, remain amongst the best documented and historically reliable recorded events of antiquity. This is, and always has been, the judgment of the best historians - both Christian and non-Christian - and remains so today. Of course, that is not what CNN, for example, or the popular press would have us believe and it is the easiest thing in the world to find willing "scholars" from leading university Religion Departments to appear and say whatever might be acceptable to the current thoughts and fashions of any given generation. But this is not new; it began in the time of the apostle Paul himself and his words to Timothy are just as true today as at any time in history:

"I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." (II Tim. 4:3-4).

Most of the attempts to debunk the testimony of the Gospels goes back to the Enlightenment of the 18th century and then culminated in 19th century Europe. Those attempts were themselves debunked by the leading biblical scholars of their times and that has remained true up until today in the midst of another wave of headline making attempts to devalue the Gospels in particular and the Bible in general. Bart Ehrman, a former evangelical Christian, is the most famous of the modern day Bible critics and his many books and interviews on television and in the popular press have given him a large following. He proclaims himself to be a "happy agnostic," though only the latter term really seems to be true. Since he is a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill my tax dollars, unfortunately, have helped pay for his activities - much to my chagrin. Many of my own students have gone on to take classes under him at UNC and I have personally read many of his books which tend to repeat and repackage what he has said in earlier works in new ways - and, for new dollars! Though he presents his research as "new findings" or else information that the church has deviously sought to hide over the centuries, they are instead topics and issues in biblical studies that have been well-known, addressed - and all of the important ones solved - ever since they were first brought up centuries ago. Ehrman, as with most charlatans, specializes in half-truths as well as the arrangement of his popular works in a sensationalist style that appeals to those with "itching ears" rather than a sincere search for the truth. Although when he sticks to purely professional academic work he can actually produce some solid research, even then it is almost always devalued by the unlikely interpretative spin that he places on it. Many modern day believing scholars have addressed almost everything that Ehrman has produced and have shown just how flawed his research and/or his presentation of it normally is. Unfortunately, his "myths" are currently fashionable for those who are looking to debunk the Bible "to suit their own passions" and so there are many other similar "scholars" who are following in his wake. It is simply the hip thing to do in universities and biblical studies today.

This debate does, however, highlight the necessity of studying and teaching the Bible accurately in the light of its own original modes of composition, writing and purposes. To not do so opens the Christian church to rightful criticism from without and this has all too often been the case. However, errors in biblical studies by the church does not justify even worse errors by those who criticize it. What is needed is simply correct methods of study and interpretation that are followed consistently by all. Fortunately, these correct methods are now recognized and agreed upon by all of the best biblical scholars across denominational lines. A very good place to start in understanding them is a book such as *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth* by Fee and Stuart. These scholars, for example, hold that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are indeed "inspired by God" but they also recognize them to be literary compositions that also stand on their own as reliable historical documents when properly read and understood. However, they are not history books or biographies compiled and composed according to our modern ways of thinking. Instead, each of these Gospels was originally compiled, composed and written with a specific audience in mind to communicate the "gospel" or "good news" of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. It was then written in that light and sent to that original audience for its own

specific purposes. Only much later were these Gospels collected and put together in the New Testament as we have them today. Two famous examples of the Gospels expressly saying this of themselves are in the Gospels of Luke and John:

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:1-4).

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book; but these are written so 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).

Nothing could be clearer than the simplicity of these purposes of the Gospels. As with all of the books of the Bible the Gospels must be read and understood as much as possible according to their own original intent and meaning and in the light of their original purposes to the audiences to whom they were originally sent. When they are read in this way the beauty and meaning of their composition and message comes through as intended even today - even if we don't understand all of the details of their original history, culture or literary composition. We never will; however, the beauty and simple meaning of their message remains. That is why when simply read and heard the beauty and significance of their meaning has taken hold of every generation. That is how they were intended to be heard and understood - not as modern day text books of history, science or even theology. It is only the modern and overly extreme "rationalism" of the Enlightenment that a priori disallowed even the possibility of miracles, and, therefore - surprise! - found the Gospels unreliable, that has caused them to be doubted whenever and wherever they are. Otherwise, they stand on their own as being not only profoundly important as to their spiritual significance, but also profoundly important as to their literary beauty and historical witness as well.

Of course, most people will read and accept what they want to in this as in other fields - not, out of a genuine search for the truth, but instead, to "accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions." This should be apparent to anyone who is aware of the culture of our times or who has studied in the universities, colleges, and academies of our times. Nevertheless, let us as the people of God - and as true seekers after truth - read the Gospels, and indeed the Bible as whole, as God would have us, in the light of their original purposes for his people. When done so, they will be the best presentations ever of the beauty of the gospel message and, therefore, "the power of God, at work, for the salvation of everyone who believes." (Rom. 1:16).

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November 28, 2013

Thanksgiving Day in America

As a Christian believer there is certainly much to be thankful to God for on this Thanksgiving Day in America. For me personally, Thanksgiving Day will always be most memorable because my dear wife, Dorota, and I were married on Thanksgiving Day of 1984 in Krakow, Poland, where of course, the day was not a holiday. Thanksgiving Day for me will also forever be the background of many childhood memories of family gatherings as I was growing up in North Carolina. Those were times of good food, good football, and warm fellowship in several small and large towns of central and eastern North Carolina. Most importantly, my entire greater family were born and raised as Christians - mostly Presbyterian and Baptist - and the general atmosphere of our conversations assumed this common outlook together with the moral character associated with it. This is not to say that there was agreement on every issue either theologically or politically, but, there was agreement on what constituted correct personal Christian moral and ethical character and that outlook framed everything else. Most importantly, my parents and all of my aunts and uncles were members of what has become known as "the Greatest Generation" - made famous by the well known television anchor Tom Brokaw's book by the same title. This was the American generation that had been raised during the hardships of the Great Depression, had fought or otherwise served in World War II, and then formed the moral, civic and political backbone of America during the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement and the general growth, prosperity and development of American society through the rest of the 20th century. The basis of their own lives was a common bond formed by their religious faith expressed both in their own lives and in their churches, their strong family and civic values, and their sense of devotion to the ideals which America had been founded upon and which they themselves had fought to preserve - ideals and rights of freedom, equality and justice - given by, and exercised under, God.

Indeed, this "Greatest Generation" of Americans represented in a modern context what has always been best in the history of America. Their own devotion and accomplishments are rivaled only by America's founding generation with names such as Washington, Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Jay, Hamilton, Marshall and others with whom they share - in ideals, principles and actual practice - so very much. That "Founding Generation" consisted of perhaps the greatest collection of political thinkers and leaders in history. But it was their own personal moral character built on their belief in God and their ultimate accountability to him - irrespective of their differences in specific religious beliefs and affiliations - that was the foundation for all else that they did. It is this common foundation of religious belief and moral conduct that ties them together with what has come to be known as "the Greatest Generation". I will personally always be thankful for all that I learned from each of my relatives from that generation - especially, their example of simple religious belief and devotion, their dignity of life in their moral conduct both personally and towards others, and, finally, their strong sense of moral, civic and political responsibility at all levels of American life. In fact, despite many imperfections along the way, these principles and ideals have always been the norms and hallmarks of American life since the very beginnings of American history. They are the very principles and ideals that the great visiting Frenchman Alexis de Toqueville noted as being unique to the America of the 1830s and then inspired him to write what is perhaps the greatest book ever about this country, *Democracy in America*. From

the beginning of American history those same ideals and principles inspired and undergirded much of America's colonization and settlement all up and down the Atlantic coast in the 1600s and 1700s. They were strengthened by the godly biblical influence of the Great Awakening of the mid-1700s that swept the entire nation and touched the moral and spiritual life of almost every American both inside and outside of the organized churches of the times. And, they were the driving force of both the founding of the American republic in 1776 and of the day to day life of its people ever since.

As the great British historian Paul Johnson has noted in his wonderful book *A History of the American People* almost all nations are born out of war and often with at least a certain amount of injustice along the way as well. It is the subsequent history of the countries that are formed out of those wars, etc. that, to a great degree, determine how just and "worth it" those wars were. For America, two great injustices - the conquering of indigenous peoples and the enslavement of another - have always cried out to be atoned for and justified by the forming of a society that is far more free, equal, and just than those which it has replaced. To a great degree this has actually been done - through the real-life blood, sweat and tears of political, economic, social, religious, and even, military interactions - over the entire course of American history. And, of course, the quest for an ever more just society continues. Unfortunately, most foreign observers, visitors and commentators do not understand just how complex this process has been, and indeed, continues to be in America. As a nation deliberately born "under God" on principles of freedom, equality and justice it has grown as a nation of millions and millions of immigrants - each with their own background - to be the most diverse country in the history of the world and yet, at the same time, to govern itself at every level on the republican principles of representative democracy. In fact, self-government goes back to the very beginnings of American history when each colony, on the whole, governed itself. Since that time self-government has extended itself to every imaginable American institution beginning at the local grassroots level in autonomous families, churches, civic groups, schools, clubs, businesses and associations of every kind, and then, on to the representative autonomous governments of towns, cities, counties, states and finally, of course, to the national government itself. No country in history has ever experienced anything close to the breadth and scale of the variety of self-governing interactions of this nation as it continues what has always been called, the great "American experiment in republican government."

As a Christian believer my allegiance, of course, is first and foremost to God my Father and to Jesus Christ, my Lord. Together with my fellow brothers and sister in Christ I am a child in God's family and a citizen of his kingdom. As with all devout Christian believers my greatest desire is for God's kingdom to come and for his will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Nevertheless, as also with all of my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, I now live in a particular time in history and am a citizen of a particular nation of this time. Though I have visited some 50 countries in my lifetime and have lived extensively in two, I, by birth, happen to be an American and it is within this nation that I must principally live my life according to the political, economic and social structures of my time. As a Christian the principles by which I live - to believe in Christ, and live a Christ-like life, until Christ's return - are the same no matter what country I live in. However, the application of those principles varies enormously depending on the country, state, region or locality of where I live. Not only I, but every Christian must learn to live within the reality and opportunities of those varied situations - and, it is the better part of wisdom to

understand that other Christians in other countries, regions, states, cities, etc. have their own unique situations and it is better to be very, very slow to judge their particular actions in the light of those unique situations. Individual Christians from every historical period located in every country, region, etc. will ultimately give account of themselves to God - not, to other Christians in other times or countries, or regions. That includes "the Pilgrims" who founded Plymouth colony in 1620. They were searching for the freedom to practice their own understanding of the Christian faith and to find a place where they could establish their own unique community free from the worldly pursuits and enticements of the Old World. They found this freedom in the New World and, though about half of them died during the first winter, those who survived endured to celebrate the first American Thanksgiving in the following fall of 1621. Almost all countries have certain events, historical figures, and ideals to look back on and to celebrate as citizens of those countries. These represent what is best in that country's history and provide an example and foundation for life in that nation's present time. When I visit those countries I always try to learn more about that history and to appreciate it just as I would my own. However, on this Thanksgiving day as a Christian believer in America I give special thanks for my own heritage as an American and I ask God to continue - in his overarching divine providence - to guide this nation "under God" in the light of his own sovereign wisdom and purposes.

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October 28, 2013

Speaking in Tongues - as the Spirit Gives the Words to Speak (Acts 2:1-4)

The first time I spoke in tongues was forty years ago this month - in the Fall of 1973 - at a picnic table by a lake at St. Andrews College in Laurinburg, North Carolina. The experience was just like that spoken of in the New Testament Book of Acts and in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: I as a Christian believer born of God's Spirit spoke forth - totally in control of my own faculties - but as I spoke the Spirit within me gave me the words to speak. It was a beautiful language that flowed naturally from within that I myself did not know. This experience - which millions of other Christians have also received - changed my life forever and I've spoken in tongues as part of my own private prayer life almost every day since. It has never failed to build me up spiritually and to remind me that I am a child of God - saved by his grace and born of his Spirit. I was eighteen years old at the time I first spoke in tongues and, though I had been a devout Christian all of my life, I longed for a manifestation of the real presence of God's Spirit in my life in a way that corresponded with the living power and presence of God's gift of holy Spirit that was so obviously alive and real in the first century church. As a teenager I had read the New Testament over and over in many different versions and I had seen the importance of the gift of God's Spirit - in action - as recorded in the New Testament from the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 and then throughout the pages of the rest of the New Testament. But though I read about it everywhere in the New Testament, I saw little evidence of the Spirit in manifestation in the church in which I grew up in or in the churches of my

Christian friends - at least, not in a way that corresponded to the manifestations of the Spirit spoken of in the Book of Acts and in the New Testament Letters.

When I read the New Testament as a teenager, searching for understanding, scriptural sections such as Acts 2, 8, 10, 19 and I Corinthians 12-14 in particular indicated that the presence of the Spirit of God in the early church via manifestations such as speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, prophecy, discerning of spirits, and even, healings and miracles was the norm of the first century new covenant church. In short, the Spirit of God was not simply a doctrine or theory or romantic notion - expressed as part of some mysterious creed or ritual or emotional outburst - but rather, it was a living reality of the power and presence of God himself in the lives of the new covenant Christian believers. That is what I saw so obviously in the Book of Acts and in the New Testament Letters and that is what I longed for in my own life as a young Christian believer who wanted to know and live for God. When I first spoke in tongues that longing was fulfilled in a way that changed my life forever and that has also sparked what has been a lifetime of Christian growth, fellowship and service as a child in God's family.

Of course, speaking in tongues is only one manifestation of the Spirit of God as spoken of in I Corinthians 12-14 and as evidenced in other places in the New Testament. There have been millions of dedicated Christians over the years who have never spoken in tongues and yet have manifested God's Spirit in other ways and, most importantly, cultivated the fruit of the Spirit in a Christ-like manner in their lives. The New Testament clearly teaches that all those who believe in Christ are born of God's Spirit and baptized in, or by, that Spirit into the one body of Christ. It is axiomatic then that Christian believers are filled with God's Spirit and thus become heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ as children in God's family. Though no particular manifestation of the Spirit as listed in I Corinthians 12 is a necessary evidence of the presence of God's Spirit, it is equally true that a dormant Spirit would have made little sense to the first century church. Instead, God was thought to be at work in his people through his Spirit in a variety of ways - all for the common good of the church. Speaking in tongues is the manifestation that is most often mentioned in Acts when the Spirit is initially received by believers upon acceptance of Christ. All of the twelve apostles - the leaders of the first century church - spoke in tongues. So, of course, did the apostle Paul and he speaks very highly of it as a blessing for his own life as well as desiring for other Christians to have this blessing as well. Even a mighty Roman centurion, Cornelius, together with his whole household, are portrayed in Acts 10 as speaking in tongues and Acts 15 then describes this manifestation of God's Spirit as the undeniable evidence that they as Gentiles were accepted by God as children into his own family by faith in Christ.

Though today speaking in tongues and other manifestations of the Spirit are often looked at with suspicion by traditional mainline denominations and churches, the truth is this "charismatic movement" now spans almost all denominations and groups with at least some believers in almost all denominations, for example, now experiencing the blessing of speaking in tongues in their personal prayer lives. As the Book of Acts shows God cannot be put in a box (though he will never act contrary to his revealed Word in the scriptures) and just as he gives his Spirit in direct response to faith in Christ - irrespective of denominational or group labels - so also the manifestation of that Spirit in supernatural ways for the common good of his people is given by God and inspired by his Spirit as well. In the first

century church this was the norm - so it should be the norm in the church today as God continues to work in us, his people, to will and to accomplish his good pleasure.

May we as God's people continue to grow in our knowledge and understanding of the gift of his Spirit - as a living reality - as we seek to live for him, both within the fellowship of the church of the body of Christ and in our witness to the wider world at large.

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September 21, 2013

"A Living Sacrifice, Holy and Acceptable to God"

The New Testament scholar Scott McKnight - who also writes the very popular Jesus Creed blog - has often remarked that the younger generation - including Christians - in their teens, 20s and 30s are a wonderfully sincere generation who are often vitally and properly concerned with justice and the well-being of the world at large. McKnight adds, however, that they have lost, or have never been familiar with, the biblical concept of holiness. Thus, their zeal is often great on behalf of social justice and environmental causes - indeed, a desire for justice and fairness is often paramount. However, it is rarely recognized that from a biblical and Christian perspective the root cause of these very injustices and problems of the world is, simply, personal sin - that is, the disobedience of each individual person to God either willfully or else from ignorance of his will. This is the proper biblical and Christian perspective as set out in the entire biblical story from Genesis to Revelation. In short, the problem of sin is the paramount problem of the world and it is a problem that every individual needs to recognize since all people are, personally as individual people, sinful. In the relativistic modern age in which we live "sin" may, of course, be an unpopular word or concept; however, ignoring sin or pretending that sin is not sin will never alleviate its life wrenching, pernicious and all-pervasive evil effects. God designed life, and when man does not live in accordance with his will, the effects can only be bad. Fortunately, the solution to this problem of sin has been accomplished through God's redemptive work in Christ. As Paul states, "God made him who knew no sin, to be sin for us, so that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." (II Cor. 5:21). Thus, from a true biblically Christian perspective there can be no solution to the deeper problems of society without there being a spiritual reconciliation of man to God through Christ. That solves the principle problem of sin and man's alienation from God and provides the foundation for living a life that is 'holy and acceptable to God.' It is, therefore, first and foremost the reconciliation of man to God through Christ that is the Christian mission and everything else - both in the church and in the world at large - must be built on that.

Several years ago I was privileged to teach an outstanding young Christian student, Andrew Phillips. Not only was he one of the very best history students I've ever taught, he was also a leader in our school by

his day-by-day principled Christian life. Interestingly, whenever he corresponded by e-mail, he always closed with the saying,

"Holiness, not happiness, is the chief end of man".

This well known quotation is from the wonderful book *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers, and there is a great deal of truth to it. Doing God's will - and thus living a holy life - should always be the first priority of every Christian. Of course, this also brings a certain godly "happiness" or "blessedness" with it; however, it is not the worldly happiness with which the world is so consumed and which it never truly achieves. But the point of the saying is that doing God's will comes first; not conforming to the world. I think over a span of four years every e-mail message I received from Andrew ended with this quotation. It was always a blessing to me. I don't know if Andrew still holds to this saying but I assume that he does - especially, since he is currently a Divinity student at Duke University Divinity School in Durham, NC. Of course, Christian holiness has little to do with where one studies or with the formalities of various forms of outward religious observance but rather with the holiness that comes from God himself through his gift of holy Spirit, and then the corresponding holiness in thought, word and deed of the Christian believer as he or she lives by the mind of Christ and cultivates the fruit of the Spirit. If religious ritual or observance helps in some way to achieve this end then good; otherwise, it has little or no meaning in itself and certainly does not make anyone holy and acceptable to God.

The biblical concept of holiness is first presented in the pages of Genesis in the Old Testament and then continues through the pages of the New Testament. Man's intimate and holy relationship with God was broken by sin as recorded in Genesis 1-3 and chapters 4-11 show a huge intensification of the problem. With the call of Abraham in Genesis 12 God begins his plan to restore his people and creation to the holy relationship with him that he originally intended. Indeed, it is the new covenant itself which makes possible the holiness for God's people that the old covenant of the Mosaic Law was never able to accomplish. Thus, through Christ's life, death, and resurrection and then the giving of holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) God opens up a new era of salvation for his people in which the spiritual holiness which they receive as a gift in Christ through the Spirit can then be manifested to the world through practical holy living. One of my favorite NT sections of scripture that deals with this is the section on practical Christian living in Romans 12-16. This section is built on the doctrinal section of Romans 1-11 where the apostle Paul expounds the liberating truth of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ - that is, the fulfillment of the promised new covenant message. Based on this all-encompassing mercy that is available to all (11:32) Paul then begins chapter 12 with what are also two of my favorite verses in all of the Bible because they set out the basic goal and "how to" of Christian living. In short, in one of the greatest sections in all of the New Testament on practical Christian living Paul begins with a call to holy living by living a transformed life - through the renewing of one's mind - that is holy and acceptable to God:

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Rom. 12:1-2 NRSV).

There are two aspects to holiness for the Christian believer. First, the spiritual holiness that the believer in Christ receives in Christ through the reception of God's gift of holy Spirit. This aspect of holiness is totally by grace and is therefore the gift of God to every Christian believer. It is the result of God's work in Christ and enables the now justified, forgiven, and spiritually cleansed believer to stand "holy and without blame before God." (Eph. 1:4). Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians summarizes this redemptive work of God in Christ beautifully:

"It is because of him [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God - that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.'" (1 Cor. 1:30-31 NIV).

"Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified [made holy], you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11 NIV).

In the New Testament Letters all Christian believers are called "saints" or "God's holy people" because through God's redemptive work in Christ they have been "sanctified" or "made holy" by the cleansing power of God's holy Spirit. Thus, they are spiritually "set apart" from the world and for God as children in God's family (Eph. 1:1-14). This righteous and holy status as children in God's family then becomes the springboard for righteous and holy practical living. Paul's entire Letter to the Romans sets out and expounds these truths with the first 11 chapters laying the spiritual foundation of the Christian believer's status as a spiritually justified, righteous and holy child in God's family - all by God's own mercy and grace in Christ. This then leads to the second aspect of Christian holiness. The first two verses of Romans chapter 12, therefore, build first and foremost on the acknowledgement of God's grace and mercy to Christian believers as the foundation of their Christian lives. On that foundation Christians - the saints or God's holy people - are then to live dedicated lives "as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God." The way to do this is then set out in the next verse:

"Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

Notice that this holiness in practical living has little or nothing to do with religious rituals, observances, or ascetic practices. Instead, holiness in practical Christian living is achieved by consciously changing the way we think day by day and learning to live each and every day with the mind of Christ. These ideas are life-changing principles that Paul repeats and expounds over and over in all of his letters in one way or another. The primary goal for the individual Christian believer in this life is to live a life that is "holy" and thus "acceptable to God." This is achieved by consciously choosing day by day to "not be conformed to this world" but instead to "be transformed by the renewing of our minds." It is only then - when we consciously put off our old worldly way of thinking and living and, instead, consciously put on the mind of Christ - that we live in harmony and in fellowship with God and his will. What greater goal in life could there be in life than this? That is, to live in accord with the "good, and acceptable and perfect will of God." What could possibly be more meaningful, interesting and fulfilling than that? To live in fellowship

and harmony with God almighty, the creator of the heavens and earth, and who is now our own personal father by way of his Spirit that lives in us. This should, very simply, be the goal of each and every Christian believer. This is the essence of Christian holy living that is described in all of the NT Letters as the proper response of "God's holy people" to God's love, grace and mercy that he has given to us as believers in his Son, Christ Jesus our Lord. May we, therefore, in all aspects of our lives "not be conformed to this world" but instead, "be transformed by the renewing of our minds" so as to be "living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God."

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July 15, 2013

The Biblical View of Sex and Marriage

Christians are, above all, called to be lights in the midst of the darkness of this world. This involves every aspect of life but is especially important in our relations first and foremost with God himself and then with each other. When God created mankind he made them - male and female - in his image and likeness so that they could rule over the earth in fellowship with him. That relationship between any man and any woman with God is the primary relationship upon which all other relationships are to be built. Apart from living in fellowship with God by loving God and loving others, all other human endeavors - as the Book of Ecclesiastes so vividly shows - are meaningless. But in fellowship with God every life is important, and all can enjoy a close relationship with their creator in every endeavor of life. To love God and then to love one's neighbor in accordance with God's will are justifiably the first and second great commandments, and everything else flows from there. Biblically, the next most important relationship is marriage, and for those who experience it in a godly way it is the most intimate of human relationships. Though it requires a godly, loving and giving attitude on the part of both husband and wife over a lifetime to be successful, it has for good reason traditionally been considered one of the greatest God-given blessings available in this earthly life. Only in recent decades - primarily since the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s - has there been much debate about what the Bible teaches about sex and marriage. There is a good reason for this: the Bible speaks with one voice from Genesis to Revelation that marriage is a godly and a holy relationship that is to be between a man and a woman and that the only proper place for intimate sexual relations is within that relationship.

All other intimate sexual relations in the Bible are included in the Greek word "porne" in the NT which is usually translated in the NIV and other modern translation as "sexual immorality." The exact scope of the word is determined by its context, but in its widest usage it refers to all intimate sexual relations outside of the marriage of a man and a woman as forbidden by the OT Law. When Jesus spoke in Mark 7 of "that which defiles" being "evil thoughts that proceed from the heart" thus leading to evil actions, he included "porne" or sexual morality in its widest sense. He never confronted specific sexual practices like homosexuality or pre-marital sex head-on, simply because they were not issues at the time and he was

never asked about them. Instead, such sexual practices would have been included in the thoughts and actions that were "porne" or sexually immoral. All faithful Jews at that time would have been of one accord on this matter and thus it was never a matter which Jesus had to specifically address. To see how clear the Bible is on this subject of sex and marriage, let us start in Genesis and give a few representative examples:

Genesis 2:22-24

"Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man.' "

"That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh."

Matt. 19:4-5

"'Haven't you read' he [Jesus] replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

Ephesians 5:21

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

The only biblical exception to this was the allowance of polygamy in OT times which, though not in accord with God's original intent, was allowed for particular reasons and in which the marriage relationship was still between opposite sexes. All other sexual relations between a human being with another living being (sex with the opposite sex outside of marriage, homosexual sex, or sex with an animal) were prohibited and condemned in both the OT (e.g. Ex. 22:19; Lev. 18) and in the NT (e.g. Rom. 1:25-27; I Cor. 5-6; Eph. 5:1-7; I Thess. 4:1-8; I Tim. 1:8-11). It was a given that the nations that Israel displaced in the promised land, then those that later surrounded them while they lived in the promised land, and then those that later captivated, exiled or subjected them (Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Rome) would live immorally in their sexual practices. Sometimes these immoral extra-marital sexual practices - both between opposite sexes and homosexual - were actually a part of the religious ceremonies of these pagan nations. However, Israel and then the Christian church were explicitly commanded to not live like the pagans but rather to live holy lives according to God's will including in the realm of sex and marriage. Because of their belief in one holy God and the holy lifestyle that he commanded the ancient Jews and early Christians were often considered a threat to the established polytheistic pagan order of any particular empire in which they lived. They thus were persecuted and became an easy scapegoat for the political and religious leaders of those empires when times were bad. It is perhaps true that this may be where we are headed today in various countries of the world as the forces of atheism, syncretism and/or secularism continue to advance. It is not, however, "inevitable" - which one so often hears. As history has shown, ungodly trends can be stopped, changed and reversed.

After all, even the ungodly Roman Empire was to a great degree Christianized in the early centuries after Christ - to the great relief of the world for the next millennium and a half. At any rate, the biblical Christian is supposed to live this life in the light of a better life, age, and world to come. The Book of Hebrews sums up this biblical view:

Hebrews 13:4

"Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and the sexually immoral."

As with all things biblical there is a right and wrong way to live. The biblical view is that the just will be eventually vindicated and that the unjust will eventually be punished. This is true of marriage and sex as well. As with all biblical rights and wrongs God's love, grace and mercy "cover a multitude of sins" when we acknowledge our wrongdoing and seek his forgiveness. The same love, grace and mercy should be true of us in our relationships with each other as we live in imitation of God and Christ in our marriage relationships. However, love, grace and mercy are necessary precisely because there are clear biblical rights and wrongs on this topic of which we all at times may fall short. The rights and wrongs, however, do not change and Christians should not compromise on them since they are God-given and the source for blessings and fulfillment, not - as the world would have us think - pain and bondage.

Of course, the Bible has much to say both in the OT and NT about the great and many blessings of a godly marriage and I recommend that faithful Christians take the time to study this topic in great depth over the course of their lifetimes. With the true sanctity of marriage being undermined more and more in our societies in recent times it is vital that its true biblical meaning and blessings be understood and properly practiced - at least, by those who want to live in harmony with God's will. Fortunately, for Christian believers who desire to do God's will this is not really a complicated issue. Ever since its establishment in Genesis 2 marriage has been the bedrock of society, especially when practiced in the light of its original biblical foundations as a God-ordained institution. It has on the whole been the main source for human society of social stability, moral certitude, and, of course, the pro-creation and care of children. On a personal level, it has often been the source of some of the greatest joy and fulfillment that this present life can offer. The decrease in the stability of marriage and in how it is viewed has occurred correspondingly with the decrease in religious belief and practice over the last few decades in Western society. Unsurprisingly, this has also led to a corresponding increase in many other moral, social and economic ills. Unfortunately, the connection between all of these is not something that a morally relativistic society wishes to see.

In today's Western society one is free to take any view of marriage that one desires to take and laws are changing in many directions. A person can already find some nation, state or local region that will support his or her view. Indeed, it is ever increasingly likely that one can even find a professedly Christian denomination, local church and/or synagogue to support that view irrespective of how out of step it may be with traditional Christian values. And, for that shrinking segment of Christian denominations that believes that biblical support would be helpful, there are plenty of scholars to provide an interpretation - however unlikely and textually unjustified - to fit one's every view. Of course

this flies in face of thousands of years of near unanimity on the subject since the biblical evidence is, in fact, crystal clear. However, if one decides to depart from seeking the original intent and meaning of the biblical authors and instead substitute a post-modernist viewpoint in interpreting the biblical texts then it is certain that the texts will yield an interpretation that will fit whatever view you want. That is, after all, the basis and goal of post-modernism: to "deconstruct" texts so that they have no certain meaning at all, thus, allowing a person to choose any interpretation one desires and, correspondingly, to choose any lifestyle one so desires to live. However, for those of us who believe the Bible to be the expression of God's will for mankind the true issue is simply to know and live in the light of God's word and then to receive the blessings thereof. Fortunately, the true biblical view on marriage and sex is clear and is consistent from Genesis to Revelation for those who truly want to know it and live in the light of it. Thus, whatever the laws of any society are - or become - in regards to marriage and sex faithful Christians can enjoy the certainty of knowing God's will and living in a deep, rich and meaningful marriage relationship as God originally intended and still intends.

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June 15, 2013

The Local "Church of the Living God" - The Pillar and Foundation of Truth

Summer is upon us and its first highlight for us was our large Sunday fellowship on June 2 of our local church Cary Christian Fellowship. Our church is a fellowship of fellowships that meets in various homes during the week and then in a larger gathering on the first Sunday of every month. This month we met, as usual, at the homestead of David and Pam Hahn in the country on their large open deck surrounded by the beauty of nature and next to their pond. There were about 50 of us including men, women and children of all generations and backgrounds. It was a wonderful time of fellowship that included group singing, a duet, prayer and a wonderful teaching of God's word from the Bible by Scot Hahn. All of this was against the southern background of birds singing, frogs croaking, fish splashing, dogs wandering, and deer drinking at the pond. Afterwards, we shared the Lord's Supper together and ate a pot-luck meal together. I can't imagine a better church to have been a part of on that particular Sunday morning in the South.

When I was growing in central North Carolina I had a great desire to learn the truth of God's word in the Bible and then to be able to share it with others. Fortunately, I've been able and privileged to that throughout my life, though often not in the traditional formats or forums of the major denominations of the world. That opportunity existed and I was originally attracted to it; however, as I read and studied the Bible and then became involved in Bible study groups with other committed believers I came to see that for me the house-church movement was the place where I could most effectively reach others for God. Forty years after making that decision at the age of 18 I not only have no regrets regarding it but can only be tremendously thankful to God for the unique opportunities I've had to fellowship and grow

with so many wonderful believers through this movement. Of course, I remain thankful for all Christians everywhere - from whatever group, denomination, or tradition - who are truly endeavoring to live for God and help others to do the same. I have many friends, colleagues, students, etc. who are members of traditional churches or fellowships of many varied kinds whom I genuinely, and often, financially support. Nevertheless, being a part of a non-conformist and independent house-church movement has given me the flexibility and freedom to grow with God and serve others in a way that I personally could never have found otherwise.

Each of us must find the place where we can best grow with God and serve others within the body of Christ and within the world. Spiritually, we are all baptized by one Spirit into one body so as to make up the universal church of the body of Christ that spans the world, and indeed, two thousand years of Christian history. However, the vast majority of references to "church" in the New Testament refer to the local assemblies, congregations, or fellowships of Christians who met regularly - usually in homes originally - for the purpose of building each other up, worshipping God, and providing a welcoming home for those desiring to live for God. Much has changed over the centuries in terms of the growth and development of the church as a whole and of how most churches are organized. Each and every Christian should seek find that local church or fellowship that he or she can best grow with God and serve others. No Christian, leader or otherwise, has any right to prevent any individual Christian from doing that and, instead, Christian leaders should actually enable that process. God is far bigger than any individual Christian, Christian leader, or Christian church or denomination. And, every Christians should seek to know that God first and foremost and then fellowship with others wherever that Christian can best grow with God and serve him. Since life is usually pretty long the local church that a believer is a part of may change many times over the course of a life-time; however, the goal of the individual Christian of the local church in growing with and serving God should always be the same.

This website "The Unity of the Spirit" exists to help Christian believers - and those searching - anywhere in the world to grow with God and then to serve him in the many contexts of life, fellowships, and societies in which they live. May God bless all of you, our dear brothers and sisters in Christ, in this summer ahead in all of your endeavors! And, may we all endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace as we strive to serve - wherever we may be in all the contexts of life - the God and Father of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

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May 19, 2013

Pentecost Sunday: the Birthday of the Church of the Body of Christ

Pentecost Sunday is a day that is full of meaning for the Christian church for it is on the day commemorated on this Sunday that the church of the body of Christ began. The day of Pentecost as

recorded in Acts 2 marks a particular high point along the way in the biblical story of fulfillment. It is on this day that the one people of God, as marked out by their faith in the crucified and risen Christ and their subsequent reception of God's gift of his Spirit, begin to be re-constituted - equally from among Jews and Gentiles - into what we now call the church of the body of Christ. Indeed, since that day it is "by one Spirit that we are all baptized into one body" (I Cor. 12:12-13) thus making up the church of the body of Christ that spans the centuries since Pentecost. This event marks the fulfillment of many Old Testament themes such as the beginning of the new covenant era of salvation. However, it also is an event that is not fully understood by even the people who participate in it until God later reveals his secret "plan of the ages" many years later to the apostle Paul as well as to the other New Testament apostles and prophets. It is this "mystery" or "secret" plan that was long hidden in God since before the creation of the world that has now been fully revealed and has become the basis for understanding the universal church of the body of Christ - consisting of all who truly believe in Christ - that transcends all man-made churches, denominations and local fellowships.

The significance of these events must be understood in continuity with the entire biblical story as a whole. Most importantly, in the Bible - from Genesis to Revelation - there has always been one and only one God, one people of God, and one hope of salvation for all of God's people. Each of these themes is introduced in the Old Testament Book of Genesis. It is then further explained and developed throughout the course of the entire Bible both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Then, it finds its ultimate fulfillment in the last chapters of the New Testament Book of Revelation. There God finally destroys all evil, makes all things new, and reigns together with his redeemed people in the paradise of a new heavens and earth forever.

Throughout the Bible the one people of God is always identified as the people of faith - that is, the people of faith in the one true God who is a righteous, holy and loving God. This "faith" is always assumed as being a "living faith" rather than simply mental assent, or, as the Book of James would later put it, a "dead faith". As such, the people of God from Genesis onward are a people animated by their belief in, abiding trust in, and reverence for, the one true God who created them in his image to rule in a godly way - that is, in a righteous, holy and loving way - over the earth. Though far from perfect and marred by sin (after the fall), they were still expected to bring forth the fruits of their faith relationship with God and to be guided in all their dealings by their trust and reverence for him. However, as history moved on and people began to depart more and more from the one true God, God eventually called one specific individual - Abraham - to be "the father of all who believe". God then promised that not only would he bless Abraham and the nation that he would beget, but also that "through him [Abraham] all peoples of the earth will be blessed". Much of the rest of the Old Testament deals with the working out of this promise to Abraham via his descendents, God's chosen people, Israel. In fact, Israel is called specifically to bring the knowledge of the one true God and his righteous, holy and loving laws to the rest of world. This theme of God calling Israel to be his chosen people finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, the Messiah, or Christ, of God. As the both the son of David and son of God, Jesus is himself the ultimate representative of God to both Israel and to the entire world. It is in and through this Jesus, the Christ, that all of God's purposes are subsequently achieved. It is the coming of Christ and, eventually, his sacrificial death and resurrection, that opens the way for a new reconstitution of the one true people

of God in a way that had never been envisioned before - except, of course, in the secret counsels of God himself. This secret plan of God, hidden in himself, had never before been revealed until it is revealed to the apostle Paul and the other NT apostles and prophets. This plan is fully revealed and expounded most clearly in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. Chapter 3 gives a summation of its main points:

"This mystery is that through the gospel [i.e., through believing the gospel message of salvation, Eph. 1:13-14] the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." (Eph. 3:6).

This verse is simply loaded with truths that sum up many biblical themes and extend Old Testament promises to all who believe in Christ on an equal basis in a way never before envisioned by the Old Testament people of God. In short, this "good news" is that all who believe in Christ - whether Jews or Gentiles - are now equal members in God's family and also equally share in all that God has promised for his people, both now in the present and forever into the future. By receiving God's gift of the Spirit now in this present life God's people have the firstfruits or down payment of a glorious inheritance to come despite still having to deal with the sufferings of this present time. Then, after Christ's second coming they will receive the full life of the age to come - after all evil and suffering is destroyed - in God's coming kingdom of the new heavens and new earth where righteousness will dwell forever. But, it is "now" that we are the children of God (I John 3:1-3) and the church of the body of Christ needs to realize its significance as the one people of God is this present world and as witness to this present world of the true purposes of God now realized in Christ. Below I present three past articles from "The Unity of the Spirit" that deal in depth with the church of the body of Christ. I hope you will take the time to study them thoroughly and may they be a blessing to you and to your local church as part of the greater universal and transcendent church of the body of Christ.

1. "One Spirit-One Body" by Chuck LaMattina
2. "The Church: A Theological Foundation" by Mark Mattison
3. "The People of God" by Richie Temple

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March 31, 2013

Resurrection Sunday

On this Easter, or Resurrection Sunday, of 2013 I send my greetings to all my fellow-believers in God our Father and in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This is the weekend when all over the world Christians celebrate two of the central historical and salvific events upon which the Christian faith is built: the

sacrificial death and, then, resurrection of Jesus Christ. In my own personal life, growing up in a protestant Christian home and society of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, I cannot remember a time when I did not believe in these two events. In my nation, state and local community these events were celebrated as givens that were assumed as being historically true and as forming a central part of our unashamedly religious and, indeed, civic culture. In my home we always read all, or some parts, of the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Sometimes we would also watch a movie or television portrayal of those Gospel events as well. Then, we almost always attended a traditional Easter service which culminated in the partaking of communion, or the Lord's Supper, together. Thinking of these events bring back warm memories for me and, of course, they also describe events that in one way or another were true for most of the world that had formerly been called Christendom - whether Protestant, Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. Though these events are no longer as prominently a part of our secularized culture today as they once were, they are still widely celebrated in greater or lesser ways depending on the particular country, region, state and culture. To the degree that the true biblical meaning and significance of these events is magnified and promoted this is to be greatly welcomed and encouraged. Indeed, these central events of the sacrificial death and then resurrection of Christ have from the very beginning of Christianity formed the unifying core of true Christian belief and of an authentic historical Christian world-view. They are among the non-negotiable truths that set apart true Christianity from other religions of the world and are also the simple and yet profound foundational truths upon which true Christianity is built, nourished and announced as "the gospel" or "good news".

The apostle Paul emphasizes this in his First Letter to the Corinthians:

"Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. 2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance[a]: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas,[b] and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

9 For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. 11 Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed." (NIV).

These simple and beautiful truths of Christ's sacrificial death and then resurrection are also life-changing because they are "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). These truths were also very early in Christian history symbolized in the Lord's Supper as begun and commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ himself. Apparently, this Lord's Supper became a central focus of early Christian gatherings even in New Testament times since it so vividly portrayed the central truths of the Christian

faith. These truths are alluded to in association with the Lord's Supper from time to time in the New Testament itself and were later expounded by the apostle Paul to a church in Corinth that was anything but a model church and had even gone astray in its understanding and practice of the foundational truths of the Lord's Supper:

"In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. 18 In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. 19 No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. 20 So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21 for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. 22 Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

27 So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. 29 For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31 But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. 32 Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

33 So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. 34 Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment." (1 Cor.11:17-34 NIV).

It is obvious from the verses above the simplicity, and yet, profound meaning and seriousness with which the apostle Paul viewed the Lord's Supper. Verses 23 through 26 set forth the heart of this new covenant symbolic portrayal of the good news of what Christ accomplished by way of his sacrificial death and then resurrection. And, Paul is absolutely intent on emphasizing that this good news is for all who believe in Christ and is to be celebrated in unity together by all who believe in Christ - irrespective of racial, ethnic or social distinctions. To the degree the Lord's Supper is now celebrated in this light - as emphasizing what Christ accomplished by his sacrificial death and then resurrection - it continues to capture the essential essence of first century Christianity and also continues to be a unifying factor in Christianity today. However, almost from the time the Lord's Supper was first begun its simple, liberating and unifying truths have tended to be obscured, or even corrupted, by an ever increasing non-biblical over-ritualization of its original New Testament symbolic portrayal in much of the institutional

Christian church. The New Testament makes clear that no ceremony, rite or ritual has power intrinsically in and of itself. It is the "gospel" message - portrayed symbolically in the Lord's Supper - that is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" - not, the Lord's Supper itself as a rite or ritual. It would certainly be difficult to imagine Christ or Paul as each are depicted in the pages of the New Testament as supporting many, if any, of the vestments, elements, rituals and theologies that have come to be associated with the celebration of the Lord's Supper in so much of institutional Christianity today. That these practices can create a feeling or a sense of mystery, awe, wonder and reverence in the participant is not doubted; however, in New Testament terms it is only the new covenant gospel message that is, or should be, symbolically portrayed in the Lord's Supper that is important. And, there is nothing mysterious about the meaning of that gospel message - in fact, its portrayal in the Lord's Supper is meant above all to make clear to all the simplicity and liberating truths of its meaning for all.

Let us as the redeemed and set-apart people of God both now and until the time our Lord comes again, see through and put off the non-biblical over-ritualization that obscures and focus instead on the simple and liberating truths of the gospel that the Lord's Supper portrays. As we do so we can more clearly and simply live as the new covenant people of God - the one body of Christ - that God has called us all to be - together, in the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Notes:

Much has been written about the Lord's Supper over the centuries and the section quoted above from 1 Corinthians 11 can be unclear or ambiguous in the various versions of the Bible, especially the older ones such as the KJV. I would recommend using the NIV as above and compare it with others such as ESV or NRSV, etc. Since we have so many centuries of ritual, theology, etc. built into our understanding of the Lord's Supper it is difficult, yet all the more necessary, to penetrate to Paul's original intent and meaning in the words, phrases and concepts he himself uses. I recommend the following as excellent scholarly helps in this process of understanding the original NT text:

1. The NIV Study Bible study notes.
2. I Corinthians, by Richard Hays in the Interpretation Bible commentary series
3. I Corinthians, by Gordon Fee in The New International Commentary of the NT commentary series.

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January 28, 2013

New Year's Resolutions for the Christian Life: 1. Love God and 2. Love One's Neighbor as Oneself

January is always a good month which many people use to review what is going on in their lives and to set or re-set resolutions and priorities for the year to come. Of course, from a Christian perspective our

spiritual priorities are always the same and we should resolve that each day should revolve around them. As a Christian believer who is a child in God's family, when I wake up in the morning the first thing I try to do is to turn my thoughts to God and then to prepare myself as best I can to live for him that day. I know that there are also millions of other Christians around the world who do the same. This provides for a basic unity of purpose for God's people around the world and it stems from the first and second great commandments which Jesus, quoting from the Old Testament, set forth as the priorities of life for his followers. Each of the Gospels records accounts of Jesus setting forth or confirming these commandments. Let's look at Matthew and Mark:

"But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

(Matthew 22:34-40 ESV)

"And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.

(Mark 12:28-34 ESV)

When Jesus, in the Gospels, sets out loving God and loving one's neighbor as oneself as the first and second great commandments he does so in answer to questions put to him. He also uses these questions as an opportunity to clearly and explicitly prioritize and summarize God's will for his people in a way that clearly carries over these most important commandments of the old covenant era into that of the new covenant era. Indeed, after the establishment of the new covenant via Christ's sacrificial death, resurrection and the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost, these two commandments continue to be the basis for Christ-like ethical living and are quoted over and over in different forms throughout the New Testament Letters of the new covenant era. Thus, though the obligations of God's people under the old covenant and the new covenant differ in many ways, the obligation and, indeed privilege, of loving God and loving one's neighbor as oneself transcend the covenants. Loving God and loving one's neighbor as oneself define the essence of a true and living relationship with God and his people throughout the Bible - irrespective of the time or place. They are not determined by religious ritual but rather by a faith-based relationship with God proceeding from the heart and involving the entire

person's being. In fact, rather than originating in the Old Testament Mosaic Law these two great commandments are rooted in God's original creation of humanity when God created mankind in his own image and then gave them the responsibility of ruling over the earth on God's behalf. Man's relationship to God first and then, secondly, to his fellow-man grew out of that original purpose of God in creation and carries over throughout the entire Bible eventually culminating in the perfect fellowship of God with his people in the new heavens and earth of the glorious and everlasting age to come.

In today's world one hears much about all kinds of "love" and indeed of "loving one's neighbor as oneself". In fact, much of the world would agree that this phrase is a good basis for practical ethical living in a modern age where the underlying ruling ethical principle is more and more promoted to be "tolerance". However, this is where the Bible and the world at large have a fundamental disagreement for the Bible's underlying ruling ethical principle is not "tolerance" but, instead, "loving God"! Whereas the world's definition of "love your neighbor as yourself" can quickly become synonymous with the idea that any action or any lifestyle is equally okay so long as it doesn't hurt someone else, the Bible's definition of "love your neighbor as yourself" is rooted in loving God first and foremost. What follows from this love for God is the biblical injunction of "be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (e.g. Lev. 19:2), - a principle set forth in the Old Testament as part and parcel of what it means to love God - and then quoted and carried over into the New Testament (e.g. I Pet. 1:15). When a person endeavors to truly love God with all one's being that person will then also love one's neighbor as oneself in the light of the clear standards of the rights and wrongs of the holiness of godly living. In short, this biblical way of loving God and loving others is both explicit and implicit throughout the whole Bible and simply cannot be watered down into a utilitarian humanistic philosophy of "I'm okay, you're okay" and "anything is okay as long as no one else is hurt".

A legal system may at times allow for this perspective but legal tolerance does not in any way mean that certain actions are in accordance with the standards of God. And, of course, regardless of how the present world judges actions, God himself will be the final judge in accordance with his own standards as set forth in the Bible. The difference in these two perspectives of "loving one's neighbor as oneself" is therefore dramatic and though there may be practical overlap at times between the outcomes of these perspectives on particular issues, the differences in points of view is fundamental. It is the difference between loving and living for God first and foremost or loving and living for self first and foremost - as contrasted throughout the New Testament. A modern conception of "tolerance" may allow for, and even insist that, "I'm okay, you're okay" or "it is your thing, do what you want to do" or "if it feels good do it, so long as it doesn't hurt someone else" or "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" or even, "if you can't be with the one you love, then love the one you're with"; however, none of these qualify as truly "loving one's neighbor as oneself" in the light of the first and greatest biblical command to love God first with all one's heart, soul, mind and strength. Thus, it is only when one truly loves God first that one can truly and properly also love one's neighbor as oneself.

Let us, therefore, resolve in this and every year to live and love in the light of the words of the Apostle Paul:

"Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)."

(Ephesians 5:1-9 ESV)

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