

THE CHURCH JESUS BUILT

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Introduction

"... I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in ... the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).

Jesus Christ proclaimed, almost 2,000 years ago, *"I will build My church."* He declared that His Church would never die out, promising that "the gates of Hades [the grave] shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). He assured His disciples that He would guide and preserve His Church until His return, promising them, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

What happened to the Church Jesus built? An eyewitness tells us that, immediately after Christ ascended into heaven after His resurrection, His apostles "went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs" (Mark 16:20). The Church had a powerful beginning.

Millions of people profess Christianity; they claim to be members of the Church Jesus founded. But Christianity is a divided religion, composed of hundreds of denominations and schisms. Through the centuries, most of Christianity's branches have assimilated many non-biblical traditions—philosophical, cultural and religious—into their teachings and practices, spawning even more variations.

How can we account for the explosion of contradictory practices and conflicting factions in the world of Christianity? Is it possible to reconcile competing denominational groups with the standards and objectives Christ established for His Church? Can we know whether

Christianity's bewildering variety of customs and teachings faithfully represents those of Jesus Christ?

Remember, Jesus not only promised He would build His Church, but He assured His disciples that His Church would not perish. Is the divided Christianity we see around us that Church? Only the Holy Scriptures can provide a reliable answer to this question.

If Christ's promise that "the gates of Hades shall not prevail" against His Church should be considered a guarantee that those who believe on His name could never be misled or corrupted, then we would have every reason to accept the collective sum of the various divisions of Christianity as the Church that Jesus built.

But He guaranteed no such thing. Instead, He warned His disciples that "false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to *deceive*, if possible, even the elect" (Mark 13:22, emphasis added throughout). Later the apostle Paul expressed his concern to Christians in his day that their minds could be "corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" by the preaching of "false apostles" (2 Corinthians 11:3, 13).

Jesus spoke even more plainly, explaining that *"narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it"*. Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:14-16).

In these pages we examine the fruits Jesus and His apostles said would identify His Church. We look at the contrasting fruits that identify those who are influenced by a different spirit and preach a different gospel. We will learn, not from human tradition or opinion but directly from God's Word, how we can distinguish "the church of the living God" (1 Timothy 3:15) from those who follow "false prophets" in sheep's clothing.

For clarity throughout this booklet, the word *Church* (with a capital C) refers to the faithful Church that Jesus Christ founded. The word *church* (with a small c) refers to local groups of believers or other physical organizations. Since *church* is not capitalized in the Bible translations quoted, all scriptural quotations—whether referring to the Body of Christ or a local congregation—use *church* with a small c.

A People Special to God

"But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Jesus Christ founded the New Testament Church, a spiritually transformed body of believers, in the city of Jerusalem on the biblical festival of Pentecost exactly 50 days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Between the time of His resurrection and the founding of His Church, Christ appeared to His apostles for 40 days, further enlightening them concerning the nature of the coming Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). During that time "He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father" (verse 4). He explained to them: ". . . You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (verse 8).

Later He inspired the apostle Paul to explain the crucial importance of the receiving of the Holy Spirit in the process of becoming a truly converted member of His Church: "Now if anyone does not

have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead [symbolically] because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness" (Romans 8:9-10).

Through the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in Christians, Jesus Christ and God the Father actively participate in their lives to strengthen and inspire them in their obedience and service to God (Philippians 2:12-13).

Therefore, the Church began when Christ's apostles received the Holy Spirit, just as He had promised (Acts 2:1-4). The Spirit of God instantly transformed them. Everyone who heard them realized they had received special inspiration and power from God.

The apostles at once began preaching—to those gathered in the temple area in Jerusalem on that Day of Pentecost—that Jesus of Nazareth was the long-awaited Messiah (or, in Greek, the Christ) (Acts 2:36). They urged their listeners to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus (verse 38). By the end of that day "about three thousand souls were added" to the Church (verse 41).

The Church that Jesus had promised to build had begun! Its members were repentant people who "gladly received" the truth of God (verse 41) and were baptized—symbolizing their acceptance of the sacrificial death of Christ for forgiveness of their sins and burial of their old, sinful ways.

The biblical view of the Church

As we examine the Church Jesus built, we see how the word *church* is used in the Bible. Throughout the Scriptures *church* and *congregation* refer to people, never to a building. The Church (the Body of Christ) or the church (a congregation of members of the Church) is made up of people called to follow Jesus Christ.

The concept of people assembling to learn the teachings of God is embedded in the writings of the Old and New Testaments. It is closely associated with one of the Ten Commandments, the law concerning the Sabbath.

During times of general obedience to God, the ancient Israelites assembled every Sabbath as a congregation. The seventh-day Sabbath (defined in the Bible as lasting from Friday evening until Saturday evening) is a "holy convocation"—a sacred assembly. God

ordained that “six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation” (Leviticus 23:3). The New International Version translates the same verse: “The seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly.”

The equivalent concept—a congregation of disciples assembling to learn God’s Word—was practiced by the earliest Christians. Notice Acts 11:26: “So it was that for a whole year they [two apostles, Barnabas and Saul] assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples [Greek *mathetes*, learners or pupils] were first called Christians in Antioch.”

The Church, then, is comprised of *disciples* or *students* of Jesus Christ who convene to receive God’s instruction.

The Bible is the textbook for these students of Christ. Paul explains that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable . . . for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The teachers are the duly appointed elders of Jesus Christ who preach God’s Word (Romans 10:14-15; 2 Timothy 4:2). God holds them accountable for “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15) and for “being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3; 1 Timothy 3:2-7).

The Church, however, is far more than just a spiritual assembly of students who gather to be instructed for their own benefit.

The special people of God

The Church of God can best be described as the special people of God, called and chosen by Him to receive salvation (eternal life) as the children of God. Their hope and future are inseparably tied to the return of Jesus Christ.

God calls—invites—people from all walks of life to become His servants. The apostle Paul, however, observed that the proud and powerful rarely repent and become members of the Church (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). They tend to be more reluctant to forsake the sinful ways of the world.

Those who willingly respond to God’s call are sealed as His holy people by receiving His Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). The Bible frequently refers to them as *the saints* (holy people) or the righteous.

The apostle Paul explained that “Jesus Christ . . . gave Himself for us, that He might . . . purify for Himself His own special people,

The Historical Background of the Term Church

The *Holman Bible Dictionary*, in its article “Church,” explains the background of the word *church*:

“Church is the English translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*. The use of the Greek term prior to the emergence of the Christian church is important as two streams of meaning flow from the history of its usage into the New Testament understanding of church.

“First, the Greek term which basically means ‘called out’ was commonly used to indicate an *assembly of citizens* of a Greek city and is so used in Acts 19:32, 39. The citizens who were quite conscious of their privileged status over against slaves and noncitizens were called to the assembly by a herald and dealt . . . with matters of common concern. When the early Christians understood themselves as constituting a church, no doubt exists that they perceived themselves as *called out* by God in Jesus Christ for a *special purpose* and that their status was a privileged one in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:19).

“Second, the Greek term was used more than one hundred times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in common use in the time of Jesus. The Hebrew term (*qahal*) meant simply ‘assembly’ and could be used in a variety of ways, referring for example to an assem-

bling of prophets (1 Sam. 19:20), soldiers (Num. 22:4), or the people of God (Deut. 9:10). The use of the term in the Old Testament in referring to the people of God is important for understanding the term ‘church’ in the New Testament.

“The first Christians were Jews who used the Greek translation of the Old Testament. For them to use a self-designation that was common in the Old Testament for the people of God reveals their understanding of the continuity that links the Old and New Testaments. The early Christians understood themselves as the people of the God who had revealed Himself in the Old Testament (Heb. 1:1-2), as the true children of Israel (Rom. 2:28-29) with Abraham as their father (Rom. 4:1-25), and as the people of the New Covenant prophesied in the Old Testament (Heb. 8:1-13).

“As a consequence of this broad background of meaning in the Greek and Old Testament worlds, the term ‘church’ is used in the New Testament of a local congregation of *called-out Christians*, such as the ‘church of God which is at Corinth’ (1 Cor. 1:2), and also of the entire people of God, such as in the affirmation that Christ is ‘the head over all things to the church, Which is his body’ (Eph. 1:22-23)” (emphasis added).

zealous for good works” (Titus 2:11-14).

The apostle Peter likewise calls members of the Church “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, [God’s] own special people . . . who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Christians are special to God in the sense that they are cherished for their faith and obedience (Ephesians 5:24, 29)—not because God regards them as inherently more worthy than others (Romans 2:11; 3:23).

The idea of a special people, chosen to be the servants of God, is not unique in Scripture to the Christian era. God inspired the introduction of the concept in the earliest pages of the Bible.

Since His creation of Adam and Eve, God has worked with people. Between the time of our first parents and the first appearance of Jesus Christ, God called and worked with many men and women, including the prophets.

God counts the prophets among His special people. Jesus spoke of a time when “Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets [will be] in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:28). The Church itself is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20).

Hebrews 11 explains why certain outstanding people in the Old Testament were special to God. The traits they held in common were their obedience and their unshakable faith in their Creator.

The earliest roots of the Church

Ancient Israel was also God’s holy people. Moses told the Israelites, “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (Deuteronomy 14:2). They were God’s “congregation” (Acts 7:38) or “church” (King James Version).

God promised Abraham, mentioned in the first book of the Bible even before the existence of Israel as a nation (Genesis 12:1-3; Galatians 3:29), that he would be the father of *a special, chosen people*.

The Bible describes the extraordinary relationship between

Abraham, Christ and the Church. The New Testament begins by reminding us that Jesus is “the Son of David, *the Son of Abraham*” (Matthew 1:1)

Why was Abraham such a significant figure in the Bible?

Abraham, who lived almost 2,000 years before Jesus Christ, was the patriarch of the people of Israel through his grandson, Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel. We read of Abraham as “the father of all those who believe” (Isaiah 51:1-2; Romans 4:1, 11-12). He shines as an example of obedience to and faith in God. Because of his obedience, God gave him a promise—a sacred covenant—that he would be the father of a great nation (Genesis 13:16; 15:5; 17:2-6).

God’s promise to Abraham involved much more than the promise of many descendants. The apostle Peter reminded his Jewish countrymen of the importance of God’s promise to Abraham. “You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Acts 3:25; Genesis 22:18).

The apostle Paul explained that the promised “Seed” in the ultimate, spiritual sense is Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind: “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ” (Galatians 3:16).

The spiritual heirs of Abraham

Only through Christ can anyone claim the eternal inheritance promised to Abraham’s seed. “And if you are Christ’s, then you are [also] Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29).

Christians, those comprising the New Testament Church, are Abraham’s *spiritual descendants*. They are the heirs of the eternal inheritance promised to Abraham. This concept must be clear in our minds if we are to fully appreciate the biblically defined and sanctioned role of the Church that Jesus Christ built.

One might ask: Are all of Abraham’s physical descendants—all descendants of the tribes of Israel—included in the seed that is the Church?

Notice how Jesus handles this question when confronted by some

How the Word *Church* is Used in Greek and English

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia gives this view of the usage of *church* in Greek and English: "Theologically, there is only one Church, for Christians are now fellow citizens of the saints and of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets."

The *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* explains the ways *church* is used in English: "The word *church* is employed to express various ideas, some of which are scriptural, others not. It may be used to signify: (1) The entire body of those who are saved by their relation to Christ. (2) A particular Christian denomination. (3) The aggregate of all the ecclesiastical communions, professing faith in Christ. (4) A single organized Christian group. (5) A building designated for Christian worship."

In contrast, the *Holman Bible Dictionary* summarizes the biblical usage of the word: "Church is the term used in the New Testament most frequently to describe a group of persons professing trust in Jesus Christ, meeting together to worship Him, and seeking to enlist others to become His followers." This resource correctly defines *church* as a group of people.

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible describes in some detail the usage of *church* in the New Testament:

"For that reality which is designated in English most commonly by the word 'church,' there are in the NT

many diverse terms, each with its own etymological and theological history. Each term conveys in varying contexts a large cluster of shifting connotations and associations.

"In contemporary English usage, 'church' as a word dominates the ecclesiological vocabulary. It comes through German and Latin from the Greek *kyriakon*, which means 'that which belongs to the Lord.' In NT Greek, *ekklesia* (almost always translated in English by 'church') is by no means so dominating or central a term.

"Of the 112 appearances of *ekklesia* [Latin spelling] in the NT, 90 per cent are found in Paul's letters, the book of Acts, and Revelation. From ten books (Mark, Luke, John, II Timothy, Titus, I-II Peter, I-II John, and Jude) this word is absent.

"*Ecclesia* was used primarily to designate a particular communal reality, not to describe its qualitative aspects. Where the distinctive qualities and dimensions of community life were intended, other terms proved more flexible and evocative.

"In comparison with these other terms, *ekklesia* was relatively neutral and colorless, conveying by itself little theological meaning. It was open to use, without basic shift in meaning, by unbelievers as well as by believers. Even among those writers who made wide use of *ekklesia*, other terms were more expressive of the reality at hand."

who, although descended from Abraham, rejected Jesus as the Messiah: "They answered and said to Him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham'" (John 8:39).

Not all of Abraham's physical descendants followed his example of faithfulness and obedience. Paul explained, "... I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption [as God's children], the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises" (Romans 9:1-4).

Paul explains that more is required to be counted among "the children of promise" than being physically descended from Abraham. "For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham . . . Those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed [of Abraham]" (verses 6-8).

Israel and circumcision redefined

Two things stand out in these words of Jesus and Paul. First, only those who are the "children of promise," those who "do the works of Abraham," are considered to be Abraham's spiritual seed as members of the Church Jesus built. Second, those in the Church are also regarded as the adopted children of God. Therefore the Church is the "Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16), the heirs of salvation.

Paul explains why the spiritual heirs of God's Kingdom take precedence over the physical descendants of Abraham as the recipients of salvation: "For circumcision [the ancient sign of the covenant with Abraham's physical descendants] is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision" (Romans 2:25). Disobedience nullifies the value of physical circumcision.

"Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law?" (verses 26-27). People who

are acceptable to God *keep His laws*.

“For he is not a Jew [in the context of the eternal inheritance promised to Abraham] who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God” (verses 28-29).

The conclusion of the matter is that faith and obedience *from the heart*, not one’s physical parentage, are essential to please God. Only those who share Abraham’s heart—whose hearts are spiritually circumcised (Deuteronomy 30:6)—are the heirs of the spiritual promises made to Abraham. For this reason salvation is available to Jews and gentiles who are willing to be circumcised in the heart. It is the circumcision of the heart, not circumcision of the flesh, that identifies the spiritual children of God.

God’s obedient people

As we have already seen, God promised Abraham: “. . . In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 26:4). Notice that God chose him for this honor “because *Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws*” (verse 5).

Abraham’s attitude of obedience, coupled with his complete faith in God, distinguished him as “the friend of God” (James 2:23). “Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness’ and he was called *God’s friend*” (verses 21-23, NIV).

Things haven’t changed. Those who are God’s “special people” still believe as well as obey God, just as Abraham did. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about tests of faith: “For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things” (2 Corinthians 2:9).

Paul explains that one’s obedience, like Abraham’s, must spring from within—from the mind and the heart. “For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down

strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your *obedience* is fulfilled” (2 Corinthians 10:4-6).

God’s people are special to Him because they, like Abraham, trust Him and wholeheartedly obey Him.

Grafted into the Israel of God

We have already seen that Paul regarded the gentiles in the Church as spiritual Jews, even though they were non-Israelite converts who were literally uncircumcised. As Christians, they became an integral part of “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16).

What makes this remarkable relationship possible between gentiles

‘Church’ and ‘Congregation’ in the Scriptures

The exact relationship of the New Testament *Church* (Greek *ekklesia*) to the *congregation* of Israel in the Old Testament can best be understood when we learn the different interpretations placed on the two Hebrew words for “congregation”: *‘edah* and *qahal*.

The *Holman Bible Dictionary*, in its article “Congregation,” explains that these Hebrew words were used with a significantly different meaning in the days of Christ and the apostles. “In the Greek Old Testament [the *Septuagint*] *‘edah* was usually translated [into Greek as] *sunagoge*, [and] *qahal* [as] *ekklesia*. In late Judaism [the Greek word] *sunagoge* depicted the actual Israelite people and [the word] *ekklesia* the ideal elect of God called to salvation. Hence [the Greek word] *ekklesia* became the term for

the Christian congregation, the church . . . There is a direct spiritual continuity between the congregation of the Old Testament and the New Testament Church. Significantly the Christian community chose the Old Testament term for the ideal people of God called to salvation (*ekklesia*), rather than the term which described all Israelites collectively (*sunagoge*).”

This explains why the New Testament word for the Church, *ekklesia*, refers only to those people, Jews and gentiles, who are called by God to receive salvation through Jesus Christ. Therefore the Church of God, the term most generally applied to God’s people in English translations of the New Testament, is the body of people who are special to God because they obey His Word and accept His Son, Jesus Christ, as the Messiah.

and spiritual Israel? Paul wrote to gentile converts, “Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh, . . . were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near [to the commonwealth of Israel and the covenants of promise] by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:11-13).

In Romans 11:13-21 Paul uses the analogy of an olive tree to represent God’s people (compare Psalm 52:8; 128:3) to explain how converted gentiles can be members of the “Israel of God.” He shows that gentiles, “being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them

Biblical Phrases and Terms for God’s Special People

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia summarizes the other descriptions of the people of God in the New Testament:

“This Church is not a human organization; it is God’s workmanship (Eph. 2:10) . . . It may thus be described in several pregnant phrases, of which the following are to be noted.

“The Church is the *people or Israel of God* (Eph. 2:12; cf. 1 Peter 2:1), in whom there is fulfillment of the ancient covenant promise: ‘I will be your God, and you shall be my people.’

“It is the *household or family of God* (Eph. 2:19; 3:15; 4:6), consisting of those who are adopted by God as sons and heirs in Christ.

“It is the *planting of God to bring forth fruit* to His glory (1 Cor. 3:10; cf. Jn. 15:1f.).

“It is the *temple of God*, built by

God Himself in Christ to be His dwelling and therefore to be the center of true holiness and worship (Eph. 2:21f.; cf. Jn. 2:19f.; 1 Cor. 3:9; 1 Pet. 2:4f.).

“It is the *bride of Christ* for which the Bridegroom gave Himself that it might be presented, cleansed, sanctified, and pure at the eternal marriage feast (Eph. 5:25).

“It is the *body of Christ*, the fullness of Him that fills all in all, Christ Himself being the head (Eph. 4:15f.) and yet also in a true sense the totality (1 Cor. 12:12), with each Christian being a member in particular (1 Cor. 12:27).”

These references tell us much about the biblical definition of the Church. Rather than a building, the Church is a called-out assembly—the group of believers invited to come out of the world for God’s special purpose.

[circumcised Israelites], and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree” (Romans 11:17).

Paul plainly shows that God’s inclusion of gentiles in His special people does not mean He favors gentiles over Israelites. “For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?” (verse 24).

God plays no favorites. Jew and gentile alike enjoy access to God’s promises through Christ. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

The special and holy people of God, like Abraham, are obedient people—selected from all nations—who have chosen not to live by bread alone, “but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Their trust in God comes from the heart and is demonstrated by their obedient actions. God’s Spirit works in them to produce faith and obedience, making them special to God.

A Spiritually Transformed People

“... Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:2).

Immediately after the Church began, Peter healed a widely known beggar who had been lame since birth (Acts 3:1-10). This extraordinary event drew the undivided attention of everyone in the temple area. Immediately “all the people ran together . . . greatly amazed” (verse 11). Peter advised the astonished crowd: “*Repent* therefore and *be converted*, that your sins may be blotted out . . .” (Acts 3:19).

Paul, on another occasion, wrote to the Christian converts in Rome: “. . . Do not be conformed to this world, but *be transformed by the renewing of your mind* . . .” (Romans 12:2).

What do these commands—repent, be converted, be transformed—mean to anyone who wishes to be a part of the Church of God?

The word *repent*, translated from the Greek *metanoeo*, literally means “to perceive afterwards” (*Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 1985, “Repent”). It conveys the concept that one must recognize and admit his sins and acknowledge the need to change his mind, heart and behavior.

The word *converted* is translated from the Greek *epistrepho*, which

means “to turn about” or “turn towards” (*Vine’s*, “Convert, Conversion”). It indicates that, in addition to recognizing and acknowledging sin, one is taking the necessary action to *turn away from sin* by *turning toward God*. This requires doing what is right, not just acknowledging what is wrong.

The word *transformed* is translated from the Greek *metamorphoo*. It implies *major or total change*—a transformation comparable to the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly.

All three of these concepts clarify the profound change God expects of Christians—a spiritual transformation we commonly call *conversion*. But no one can bring about such remarkable transformation by himself, by his own power.

The preceding words describe a miraculous shift in thinking and behavior that occurs in people who receive God’s Spirit. Only those who are converted—spiritually transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit—are Christians (Romans 8:9).

Why is this spiritual transformation so important?

Our need for spiritual discernment

Paul said, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). God wants all His people to think like He and Jesus Christ think. Only if we think like Christ will we ever learn to behave like He behaves. To understand how Christ and the Father think requires the transformation of our minds.

People assume that the themes in the Bible are easy to understand, that anyone can readily comprehend biblical truths.

Some are easily understood. But many scriptural themes and principles are also easy to misunderstand. This leads to a fundamental problem: A person tends to see *what he wants to see*.

The Bible is written in a way that makes it ever so easy for anyone to close his eyes to what he prefers not to see and to shut his ears to what he would rather not hear. As a result, he can easily develop a *distorted view* of what the Bible really says and means.

Paul’s letters in the New Testament provide us with an excellent example of this. Speaking of Paul’s writings, Peter said they “contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their

own destruction” (2 Peter 3:16, NIV).

This is no rare occurrence. Paul’s epistles, as well as other parts of the Bible, are commonly misinterpreted by people the world over. They were misunderstood in Paul’s day, and they are still frequently misunderstood.

Only people with God’s Spirit guiding their thinking can comprehend the biblical message. Those who do not have God’s Spirit either *fail to understand* or simply *refuse to accept* portions of the Scriptures.

Paul well understood this tragic human characteristic: “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14, NIV). Paul’s words are clear: *One must have God’s Spirit to comprehend spiritual truths.*

Spiritual blindness hides the truth of God

Generally, the problem is not that the Bible is all that difficult to understand. Rather, those who read it find much of what it says hard to accept, so they interpret it in a manner that is acceptable to them—more compatible with their own views.

Why this self-delusion?

The problem is twofold. First, God tells us: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways . . . As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Why is this so? Primarily because God’s thoughts and ways are *based on love*—concern for others (Matthew 22:36-40). As humans, however, we are fundamentally *self-centered*; we first think of ourselves.

Our natural tendency is to *deceive ourselves* so we can serve our own selfish interests. Jeremiah 17:9 points out that our “heart”—our basic human motivation and reasoning—“is deceitful above all things”; it leads us into self-deception. We need to recognize in ourselves this common characteristic of human nature and be willing to change it so God can transform us. We need a new way of thinking, a new heart and mind.

Our thinking must be changed by God’s Spirit so our interests will be focused outward, enabling us to love others as we love

ourselves. Commending Timothy’s loving concern for others, Paul wrote: “For I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:20-21).

Satan’s blinding role

Another major reason people get confused and misinterpret the Bible is Satan’s influence. “The god of this age has *blinded the minds* of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ . . .” (2 Corinthians 4:4, NIV). Isaiah compares this blindness to a “veil that is spread over all nations” (Isaiah 25:7).

Satan misleads humanity by inciting prejudice against biblical principles. To some extent he has, at one time or another, succeeded in deceiving all of us (Revelation 12:9). God’s Word warns us that Satan’s influence is so pervasive that “the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 John 5:19).

The combination of deception and prejudice against God’s ways has warped the spiritual character of mankind. “There is none righteous, no, not one,” wrote Paul, and “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:10, 23).

Paul explains that all have “walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others” (Ephesians 2:1-3).

This may shock you, but it’s true: We have been *blinded and deceived* by Satan’s pervasive influence. We need to repent, abandon our personal prejudices and accept the authority of the Bible. We must begin to read it with understanding.

Tragically, someone who is deceived doesn’t know he is deceived. The Bible describes people’s prejudices against God’s truth as a hardening of their hearts: “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts” (Ephesians 4:18, NIV).

Their understanding is hindered by the hardness of their hearts. That is why Jesus Christ told His followers, “*To you* it has been given to

know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but *to them* it has not been given” (Matthew 13:11, NRSV). Jesus knew that all but a handful of people cannot really understand the significance of His message—and so it remains to this day.

Jesus Christ reveals why people become hard-hearted. When faced with truths that do not fit their prejudices, they shut their ears and close their eyes. They harden their hearts by choosing not to understand matters that are contrary to their own opinions.

Jesus clearly explains this: “And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: ‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them’” (verses 14-15).

Jesus explained Satan’s deceptive role in nurturing this blindness: “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in the heart” (verse 19). Satan acts quickly to mislead and confuse those who are inclined to hear the truth by influencing them to harden their hearts and refuse to listen.

Only God can heal spiritual blindness

It is extremely difficult for many people, especially those with strong religious convictions, to acknowledge that they may not correctly understand much of the Bible.

Our tendency is to cling to what we have first learned. We tend to be prejudiced toward anything that would attempt to correct our own views. Becoming a true disciple of Jesus Christ begins with repentance—recognizing where we are wrong and *changing our beliefs and behavior*. But, before we can repent, God must open our minds. He must grant us spiritual understanding of our prejudices, sins and other weaknesses.

Jesus said that “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him,” and “no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him” (John 6:44, 65, NIV). We need God’s help in changing our hearts.

We all, to some extent, tend to be righteous in our own eyes. We naturally assume that our own ways are good and fair. The writers of the Bible, however, knew better. They warn us, for example, that “there is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death” (Proverbs 14:12, NIV). Just because we *believe* something is right doesn’t mean it *is* right.

Even if our ideas and beliefs appear right and good to us, we should be willing to reexamine them in the light of the Scriptures. Unless we carefully compare our beliefs to God’s revelation in the Bible, we risk allowing unrecognized assumptions to harden our hearts and blind us to the truth.

When comparing our beliefs with the Scriptures, we should keep these human tendencies in mind. Our inclination toward self-deception, coupled with Satan’s pervasive, deceptive influence through the world around us, is a major barrier to our understanding the Bible. It is all too easy to read our personal beliefs into God’s Word and overlook biblical truths that challenge, and can correct, our own ideas.

Blindness obscures meaning

This was the problem of many of the people in Paul’s time. They thought they understood the Scriptures; they believed they were living by them. In reality, however, they were deceived by their own preconceived notions. Paul explains that “their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted . . . Even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns [*epistrepho*, converts] to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (2 Corinthians 3:14-16).

Paul was describing normal, sincere but *spiritually blinded* religious people of his day who regularly heard the reading of the Holy Scriptures. They closed their eyes to passages that pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. Why? They blocked them from their minds because that knowledge was unacceptable to them. Their prejudices controlled their thinking. They read the Scriptures, or listened to leaders in the synagogue read them, but they missed the point.

Their example warns us not to do the same thing. Everyone needs God’s help to recognize and face contrary ways or beliefs that *seem* right but contradict God’s Word (Proverbs 14:12). Everyone must

turn to God for help to accept, understand and apply the Scriptures to his life.

The true Church of God is people whose minds God has opened to see their own shortcomings—their misdeeds and prejudices. Only if we are willing to repent—if we're inclined to change our innermost thoughts and attitudes as well as our actions—can we become true disciples of Jesus Christ.

When we study God's Word we should emulate David's attitude when he prayed: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24, NRSV).

Our prejudices are usually too deep for us to root them out by ourselves. Remember, Jesus said that "no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him" (John 6:65, NIV).

It takes a *miracle* from God for us to properly recognize some of our deeply rooted prejudices. It takes strength from our Creator for us to be willing to change them. Without His help, we could never recognize and awake from the spiritual blindness and prejudices that separate us from God.

Knowing how God enables people to overcome spiritual blindness and come to Christ—as repentant and committed Christians—is key to understanding how God's Word distinguishes those who are the people of God from those who remain spiritually blind.

Powerless without God's Spirit

God warns us not to trust our own understanding in spiritual matters (Proverbs 3:5). With only our natural abilities we are simply incapable of properly understanding many aspects of God's Word. Paul explains why we cannot trust our own minds: ". . . The mind that is set on the flesh *is hostile to God*; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Romans 8:7-8, NRSV). They lack power to control their human nature.

This is why so many people who read the Bible will not accept what it says. Even though they don't recognize it, they harbor an innate hostility toward anything that represents divine, absolute authority over their lives.

Paul explains that God's Spirit is the only remedy to the human

problem. "But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you" (verse 9). Only with the understanding and strength God provides through His Spirit can we gain the spiritual strength to overpower the dominance of our fleshly nature.

Without the help of God's Spirit, a person's spiritual perspective is distorted by the pulls of his fleshly nature and the influence Satan exerts in shaping his beliefs and values. Even those who have considerable knowledge and understanding of God's ways and try by their own strength to obey Him (like Jesus Christ's own disciples before they received the Holy Spirit) are still swayed by the pulls of the flesh. Jesus had to warn His disciples: "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). (See "The Apostles: A Case Study in Conversion," page 24.)

Even after his conversion, Paul cited himself as an example to explain how extensively human weakness controls behavior. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . It is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it" (Romans 7:15, 17-18, NRSV).

But, with the help of God's Spirit, Paul saw that he could successfully resist the pulls of his nature (2 Timothy 4:7-8). "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2).

Paul explains that, "at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6, NIV). His death made it possible for us to be forgiven of our sins and receive the Holy Spirit—giving us the spiritual power from God we need to combat the weakness of our flesh (Acts 1:8; 2:38; 2 Timothy 1:7).

A spiritual transformation

The Church of God is the people who are spiritually transformed by the power of God's Spirit. Here is how Paul sums it up: "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Romans 8:13-14).

This power of God dramatically changes the human equation. His Spirit transforms a person's life. It enables us to override the pulls of human nature and live as God commands. God's Spirit is the single most important component in a Christian's life.

The Apostles: A Case Study in Conversion

The coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) transformed the apostles of Jesus Christ from a group of ordinary men into some of the most remarkable and dynamic leaders the world has known. To appreciate the magnitude of their transformation, we need to take a closer look at the same men before they received God's Spirit.

The four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—provide us with insight into their lives. We see no indication that any of the 12 apostles had an exceptional education or any position of influence. They were common men, regarded as "uneducated and untrained" by the rulers and religious authorities of that time (Acts 4:13).

Matthew was a tax collector, a member of one of the despised professions of his day (Matthew 9:9; 18:17). Peter, his brother Andrew and two other brothers, James and John, were partners in a modest fishing enterprise (Matthew 4:18-22, Luke 5:1-10). Along with Philip, they lived in the town of Bethsaida in the northern province of Galilee (John 1:44). The only special thing about them was that they were disciples—students

and followers—of Jesus Christ.

Even more striking is the level of their lack of spiritual comprehension during their time of training. Their minds were still controlled by their fleshly nature. Their thinking and behavior were "carnal" (Romans 8:5-7). Jesus rebuked them for their lack of belief and hardness of heart (Mark 16:14).

Their attitudes and behavior during that time illustrate that even living in the presence of Jesus Christ while He was on earth—personally hearing Him teach and seeing His example—was not sufficient to transform their thinking from carnal to spiritual.

Jesus sternly chastised James and John for their attitude toward some who had rejected Jesus. "But they [the Samaritans] did not receive Him . . . And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, 'Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?' But He turned and rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them'" (Luke 9:53-57). John would later become known as

The presence or absence of God's Spirit is what determines whether a person is a servant of Christ—a true Christian. "Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His" (Romans 8:9).

Those who have received God's Spirit constitute the spiritual body

"the apostle of love"—quite a turnaround for a man who had urged Jesus Christ to annihilate a village.

The disciples were selfish. They argued among themselves as to who would be the greatest (Mark 9:33-34; Luke 22:24). James and John even tried to finagle Jesus into awarding them the two most prominent positions in His Kingdom (Mark 10:35-37).

Like any other people, each of them greatly overestimated his faithfulness and loyalty to Christ. ". . . Jesus said to them, 'All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: "I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered"'. . . Peter said to Him, 'Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be.' Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you that today, even this night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times.' But he spoke more vehemently, 'If I have to die with You, I will not deny You!' And they all said likewise" (Mark 14:27-31).

As they spoke those words, the disciples believed they would loyally do as they had said. Yet within hours they all abandoned Jesus to suffer alone (Mark 14:50). Peter even cursed and swore that he had never even known Jesus (Matthew 26:69-75; Luke 22:54-62).

After Jesus' execution, Peter and

six of the other apostles decided it was time to give up all they had learned and resume their career as fishermen (John 21:2-3). They had heard Jesus speak about His death and resurrection, but their limited perspective blinded them to the significance of Jesus' sayings. That same blindness is a part of all human beings until God opens their understanding to see what He really says in His Word.

Even after hearing reports of Jesus' resurrection, Thomas was so skeptical that he commented, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe" (John 20:25). Jesus later appeared and provided Thomas with the precise proof he requested (verses 26-29).

These were the men Jesus chose to carry His gospel to every nation. As yet they had not received God's Spirit. They were as powerless as any other human would be to fulfill their intentions and commitments to faithfully serve their Savior. It was impossible for them to be the special servants of Christ on their own strength.

Now we can understand Jesus' remark when His disciples asked Him, "Who then can be saved?" His answer: "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:25-26).

that is the Church Jesus Christ founded. “For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Corinthians 12:13, NIV).

God’s Spirit provides great power

Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ provides the power for His people to do the good works—to bear the fruit—He expects from them. “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness” (2 Peter 1:3, NIV).

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit will “guide [us] into all truth” (John 16:13) so we can know how to serve God according to His will. His Spirit makes it possible for us to “grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).

Paul talks of God’s Spirit dwelling in us: “And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22, NIV). The Holy Spirit is the direct presence and power of God working in His people. Paul admonishes Christians to “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12-13, NIV).

God’s Spirit leads to obedience

The transformation of the people of God through His Spirit is a transformation of their hearts, their innermost being. Instead of hard-heartedness and hostility to God’s laws, they gain an obedient spirit because God works in them; He dwells in them.

The apostle John says: “Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us” (1 John 3:24, NIV).

The presence of a will to obey is so central to the definition of a Christian that the apostle John boldly states: “The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did” (1 John 2:4-6, NIV). This is plain language indeed.

Jesus emphasizes that those who have not received this obedient spirit from God respond to His commands quite differently. “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men” (Mark 7:6-8, NIV).

Any who do not have an obedient spirit adjust God’s commands to accommodate their own nature and reasoning. Jesus continues: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, ‘Honour your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that” (verses 9-13, NIV).

Those who do not have God’s Spirit find it easy and convenient to disregard the biblical instructions they dislike. They devise their own traditions, giving the appearance of obeying and honoring God while sidestepping the intent of His instructions. Jesus said such worship is *in vain*—useless and empty (verse 7). Such people have eyes that can’t see and ears that can’t hear (Romans 11:8).

God’s Spirit, however, dramatically changes the attitude, outlook and spirit of His people. They earnestly desire to obey God, and He gives them a humble, obedient attitude and approach toward Him and His Word. They can willingly and faithfully obey His commandments (Revelation 12:17). They have received from Him the power of the Holy Spirit to combat Satan and their own nature.

In short, they are the transformed, special people of God.

The Mission and Responsibility of the Church

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jesus Christ gave His Church—this body of spiritually transformed believers—a responsibility to carry out. The Church’s mission is to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God and make disciples throughout the world, teaching them exactly what Jesus taught (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).

The work of the Church continues; it did not cease when the original disciples died. At first the job of the apostles, the Church’s mission has passed to each generation of God’s people. Jesus promised to be with His followers as they accomplished that work until He returns at the end of the age (verse 20).

Paul said Christ sent him into the world “to open [people’s] eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan

to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26:18).

Paul also said: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes . . .” (Romans 1:16). The gospel is God’s message of how salvation will be brought to mankind—starting with His Church.

The Church plays many roles in the bringing of salvation to the world. It stands as the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). It is the household or family of God (Ephesians 2:19; 1 Peter 4:17, NIV). It is the mother who nurtures God’s sons and daughters (Galatians 4:26). It functions as the “pillar and ground of the truth” in a spiritually confused world (1 Timothy 3:15).

Let’s look at the multifaceted responsibilities Christ gave His Church, His special people.

Must the Church save the world?

Paul describes the Church’s responsibility as “the ministry of reconciliation” because “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

God’s ultimate purpose is to gather—to reconcile—all mankind to Himself. The Church plays an important role in that worthy effort. God has commissioned it to preach how that reconciliation will occur. It is to baptize those who believe that message.

When will that reconciliation take place? A common misperception is that Jesus has commissioned His Church to save the world in this age. But that is not what the Bible teaches and is not what Paul meant in 2 Corinthians 5.

The Church’s ministry of reconciliation is only the beginning of a much greater phase of God’s plan for reconciling the world to Himself through Jesus Christ.

God has commissioned the Church to proclaim salvation to the nations. But *proclaiming* Jesus’ teaching about salvation is vastly different from *bringing* mankind to salvation. The latter will necessitate bringing the entire world to repentance and conversion. Only Jesus Christ can convert the world; that task will have to wait until He returns.

Why Christ must bring Israel to repentance

At His return Christ will begin God's reconciliation to the world by bringing the descendants of Jacob—Israel—to repentance.

At that time, Paul explains, "all Israel will be saved." How? "The Deliverer [Christ] will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob" (Romans 11:26).

Then, as soon as the restored people of Israel learn obedience as a nation, many peoples will come and say, according to the book of Isaiah, "'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house

of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3, NIV).

Zechariah tells us, "In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'" (Zechariah 8:23).

Humanity will begin to realize that the law God gave to ancient Israel must *still be observed*. Mankind will shed its prejudices and even begin keeping the biblical festivals, which God gave to ancient Israel.

Those who remain unrepentant will soon find themselves in dire

What Is the True Gospel?

What was Jesus Christ's message? He preached "the gospel of the kingdom of God" (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:14-15).

The Old English word *gospel*, or "good spell," means "good news." The good news was the centerpiece of His message. He defined His mission with these words: "*I must preach the kingdom of God . . . because for this purpose I have been sent*" (Luke 4:43).

What did He command His disciples to teach? "He sent them *to preach the kingdom of God . . .*" (Luke 9:2, 6).

What is that message about, and why is it such good news?

When Jesus Christ taught about the Kingdom of God (Luke 8:1; 9:11; 12:31; 13:18), He was simply continuing the messages of the Hebrew prophets whose words are recorded in the Old Testament. Centuries earlier God had inspired such faithful men as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah to look beyond

the difficulties and destruction of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah to a magnificent future when God would establish His world-ruling kingdom on earth under the reign of the Messiah.

Notice some of their prophecies describing this wonderful occurrence:

"The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6).

"They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse [the promised Messiah, Jesus], who shall stand as a banner to the people; for the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious" (verses 9-10).

"I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near

before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed" (Daniel 7:13-14).

"Then the LORD will go forth . . . And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two, from east to west, making a very large valley . . . Thus the LORD my God will come, and all the saints with You . . . And the LORD shall be King over all the earth" (Zechariah 14:3-5, 9).

Jesus Christ and His apostles spoke of this same world-ruling government, which He called "the Kingdom of God." In Luke 21, after describing a series of trends and events unparalleled in history, He concluded: "Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near . . . When you see these things happening, *know that the kingdom of God is near*" (verses 28-31).

The ancient prophets, Jesus and His apostles all spoke of a literal kingdom that will supersede the world's governments. When these prophecies become a reality, a triumphant cry will ring out: "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!" (Revelation 11:15).

Sadly, this message is seldom understood and rarely taught in churches. Many have accepted "a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6) that distorts and obscures this vital biblical truth. You will read in the next chapter how this "other gospel" (verses 8-9), as Paul labels it, evolved and spread throughout the world.

However, you can discover for yourself the full meaning of the gospel—the incredible good news—that Jesus Christ and the apostles preached. This same gospel is faithfully preached by the United Church of God (Matthew 24:14). For a full explanation of the true gospel, be sure to request your free copy of *The Gospel of the Kingdom* from our office nearest you.

circumstances because God will humble them by withholding rain from their crops until they change their attitude. “Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD Almighty, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. If any of the peoples of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD Almighty, they will have no rain” (Zechariah 14:16-17, NIV).

Since Christ knows human nature, He will do what is needed at that time to change the thinking of people—to bring them to repentance. But that is to occur in the future after Christ returns.

Even though the Church is to proclaim a message to the world that includes a call for repentance, Scripture tells us that relatively few people will truly repent before Christ returns. Thus, bringing the world to repentance is not the Church’s role for this age.

A small group: the light of the world

To the contrary, Jesus said to His disciples: “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). He also said, “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18-19).

God’s people have never been a popular or powerful force. Jesus describes their lot in life: “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For *the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it*” (Matthew 7:13-14, NRSV).

Yes, only a few are willing to follow all the teachings of Jesus Christ once they hear and understand them. Jesus comforted His disciples, “Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

God reveals that His people will be a *little flock* in this age. He is calling *only a few* to be the living examples of His way of life to the rest of world.

Jesus says to His true disciples, “You are the light of the world . . . Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good

works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).

God commissioned the Church to set the example of His way of life to the world. God is exposing humanity to His ways through the Church. Peter exhorts the members of the Church: “Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge” (1 Peter 2:12, NRSV).

The Church: God’s firstfruits

During “this present evil age” (Galatians 1:4), the Church of God consists of only the first small part of God’s great harvest of people to eternal life.

James calls Christians: “a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (James 1:18). They are “redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb” (Revelation 14:4).

The biblical usage of the term *firstfruits* was readily understood by members of the early Church. “In acknowledgment of the fact that all the products of the land came from God, and [in] thankfulness for His goodness, Israelites brought as an offering to Him a portion of the fruits that ripened first, these being looked upon as an earnest of the coming harvest” (*Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, 1967, “First Fruits”).

The firstfruits were the first part of the harvest, which the Israelites set apart for God. After they gathered them and dedicated them to their Creator, they harvested the rest of the crops. The apostles and other members of the early Church understood that, as firstfruits, the Church is the *first part* of God’s harvest of humanity for salvation. The vastly greater portion of the harvest will not take place until *after* Jesus Christ’s return.

Those whom God calls in this age will participate in the saving of the world—but *not* at this time and *not* as human beings. At the return of Jesus Christ they will become *immortal spirit beings*.

God will resurrect them to eternal life as the firstfruits of His harvest, receiving immortality at Christ’s return (1 Corinthians 15:20-23, 51-53). They will be kings and priests in the Kingdom of God (Revelation 5:10).

As the immortal, resurrected children of God, they will assist

Christ in teaching God's way of obedience to the world for 1,000 years. "Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years" (Revelation 20:6). The resurrection of these faithful servants of Jesus Christ to eternal life at the beginning of that 1,000 years is only the *first* resurrection (verses 4, 6).

All the dead will be resurrected

At the end of the 1,000 years, God will resurrect all others who have ever lived throughout human history to stand before Him in judgment (Revelation 20:11-12). This is far larger than the first resurrection; it is the resurrection of "the rest of the dead" (verse 5). At that time God will raise from the dead people from all nations, along with the people of Israel—all resurrected together (Matthew 11:20-24; 12:41-42).

"Do not marvel at this," Jesus said; "for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation [judgment]" (John 5:28-29).

Those who rise in this general resurrection—the resurrection of judgment—will rise as mortal, flesh-and-blood human beings (Ezekiel 37:1-10). Then they will learn God's ways, acknowledge their sins and receive His Spirit. Then they, too, can receive immortality.

Ezekiel describes their resurrection: "Thus says the Lord GOD: 'Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves . . . I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it,' says the Lord" (verses 12-14). (For more information on this vital topic, please request our free booklet *What Happens After Death?*)

Christians are the firstfruits of the redeemed. They live in a deceived world, and they must strive to be "blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom [they] shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:15).

The Church: The Body of Christ

We have already seen that Jesus Christ told His followers to go into all the world, making disciples of all nations and teaching people God's way of life. This takes cooperation and organization. To effectively describe the organized functioning of the people of God, the apostles used the analogy of the human body.

"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having

Is Today the Only Day of Salvation?

Is our present age the only time during which people can repent and be saved?

Some people assume that is what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote: "As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, 'In the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.' I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:1-2, NIV).

Paul meant exactly what he said. But be sure to notice what Paul did *not* say. He did not say that today is the *only* day of salvation, nor was that his intent.

In the original Greek there is no modifier before the phrase "day of salvation" in this verse. Most translations have added the word *the* before *day* in an attempt to clarify Paul's words—but in so doing have inadvertently distorted the meaning. The Darby Translation italicizes "the"

here to indicate that it has been added. Other versions translate this phrase as "*a* day of salvation" (Green's Literal Translation, Living Oracles New Testament).

Still other versions inconsistently translate the same phrase as "*a* day of salvation" in the first part of the verse and "*the* day of salvation" in the latter part (American Standard Version, Bible in Basic English, Green's Literal Translation, Modern King James Version, New Revised Standard Version, Phillips Modern English).

For those in the Church in this age, now is *their* day of salvation. God is calling them now. Salvation is available today to anyone who is willing to repent. That is what Paul meant.

But he neither said nor implied that salvation is available *only* in this age. Paul in no way meant to contradict the many passages in the Bible that show that many others will have an opportunity for salvation in future ages.

gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of [languages]" (1 Corinthians 12:27-28, NIV).

Directing the work of the Church as its living Head is Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:18). To emphasize how dependent the Church is on His leadership and inspiration, Jesus compares Himself to a vine: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The success of the Church is dependent on the power and inspiration it receives from Jesus Christ.

Functions within the Body of Christ are established by Him "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12, NRSV).

Paul tells us that "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone" (1 Corinthians 12:4-6, NRSV).

Spiritual leadership in the Church

Among the gifts Christ gives His Church are gifts of spiritual leadership: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11). They are entrusted with the responsibility of teaching, nourishing, protecting and building the Church. Godly character and exemplary spiritual qualifications are required of those entrusted with spiritual leadership (1 Timothy 3:1-10; Titus 1:5-9).

These are to lovingly shepherd God's flock (John 21:15-17) so that all members of this spiritual body may "come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

They are to lead the people of God to work together in unity—to love, respect and support each other. "But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other" (1 Corinthians 12:24-25, NIV).

Those who are led by Jesus Christ recognize a common Spirit in each other—the very Spirit of God, which makes them the people of God.

It should lead them to work together in unity to accomplish the mission Christ gave the Church as its ministry when He said: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you . . ." (Matthew 28:19-20).

The Church that Christ built is that special body of people who, led by God's Spirit, obey His commandments and are zealously committed to accomplishing the commission Jesus Christ gave them.

The Rise of a Counterfeit Christianity

"Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name . . . and will deceive many" (Matthew 24:4-5).

Jesus Christ told His apostles to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in His name. Most people who are familiar with the Bible realize those apostles zealously embarked on that mission. Their converts were first called Christians in the city of Antioch (Acts 11:26). Since then, so many people have been born or converted into the hundreds of denominations known collectively as "Christianity" that it is one of the world's most popular and dominant religions.

People assume that all, or at least almost all, who bear the name Christian follow the beliefs, teachings and practices of Jesus Christ. But the Bible tells us that not everyone who accepts the name of Christ is really a Christian.

Jesus predicted that some would claim His name but deny Him by their actions. He said they would "call Me 'Lord, Lord,'" but "not do the things which I say" (Luke 6:46).

Christ and His apostles spoke of *false prophets, false apostles* and

false brethren. They revealed that two opposing ostensibly Christian religions would emerge. One—the Church Jesus founded—would be led by God's Spirit and remain faithful to His teachings. The other—guided and influenced by a different spirit—would accept the name of Christ but twist His teachings to create a convincing *counterfeit* of the true Church of God.

Both would use Christ's name and claim His authority. Both would perform works that would outwardly appear good and right. Both would claim to be following Christ's true teachings. But only one would faithfully represent its founder, Jesus Christ. The other would capture the minds and hearts of humanity by attaching the name of Christ to biblically insupportable religious customs and doctrines that Jesus and His apostles neither practiced nor approved.

The apostles repeatedly warned Jesus' followers to beware of false teachers who would introduce counterfeit-Christian beliefs. Jesus Himself warned: "Take heed that no one deceives you. For *many will come in My name . . . and will deceive many*" (Matthew 24:4-5).

The New Testament presents a concise historical sketch of the roots of these two religions that profess to be Christian—one real, one counterfeit. Christ's apostles described the origin of each and their fundamental characteristics.

We have already examined the apostles' description of the Church Jesus founded. Now let's look at the record they left us of another supposedly Christian religion—one that distorted and corrupted the truth and grew to become far more powerful and influential than the small Church Jesus promised would never die out.

Teaching the traditions of men

Where do most churches get their teachings and practices? Most of their members assume they come from the Bible or from Jesus Christ Himself. But do they?

Jesus commanded His apostles to teach others exactly what He had taught—"teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20, NIV). He condemned the replacing of God's commandments with traditions and human reason. Speaking to the Pharisees, He said, "For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men . . . All too well you reject the commandment of

God, that you may keep your tradition” (Mark 7:8-9).

Jesus taught that His Church should keep the commandments of God: “If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17). He warned: “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied [preached] in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (Matthew 7:22-23). He knew that false teachers would arise who would reject the commandments of God for a distorted gospel of no law—lawlessness!

Like Jesus, the apostles consistently taught obedience to God. Peter and the other apostles risked their lives to make it clear that “we ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Paul expressed the same commitment he shared with the other apostles—of a life of obedience. “Through him [Christ] and for his name’s sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the *obedience* that comes from faith” (Romans 1:5, NIV).

Paul later cautioned members of the congregation in Colosse to hold fast to what he had taught them. “As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught . . .” (Colossians 2:6-7).

Following Christ’s example, Paul warned the Colossians not to accept traditions as replacements for the commandments of God: “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8; compare Mark 7:8-9, 13).

Why did Jesus Christ and the apostles sound such urgent warnings to avoid the traditions of men?

Subversion from within the Church

As the apostles strove to establish still more congregations of believers among the nations, a phenomenon arose that eventually produced an alternate and outwardly Christian religion—but one quite different from the Church Jesus and His apostles established.

New and different doctrines were subtly introduced. Some began

subverting the Church by challenging and contradicting the teachings of Christ’s apostles. Paul warned, “For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain” (Titus 1:10-11).

To counter this trend, Paul instructed fellow elder Titus to carefully consider the background, knowledge and character of anyone being considered for ordination: “Since an overseer is entrusted with God’s work, he must be blameless . . . He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (verses 7, 9, NIV).

Increasingly, “false apostles” began contradicting and undermining the teachings of the true apostles of Christ. Paul cautioned the church in Rome: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them. For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded. For while your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, I want you to be wise in what is good and guileless in what is evil” (Romans 16:17-19, NRSV).

Competing religious leaders, masquerading as ministers of Christ, began teaching their own false doctrines “in opposition to” Christ’s apostles and other of his faithful servants. At first they came predominantly from a Jewish background. But then false teachers emerged from people of other backgrounds within the Church. The subversive doctrines that eventually grew to be the most influential were a blend of pagan and misguided Jewish philosophies synthesized with the mysticism popular at that time.

Simon the Sorcerer was one such false teacher mentioned early in the Scriptures. After his baptism by Philip, Simon attempted to buy the office of apostle from Peter, hoping to obtain the power to grant others the Holy Spirit. Motivated by his greed for power and influence, he faked conversion to appear Christian (Acts 8:9-23). Later historical sources indicate that he blended various elements of paganism and mysticism into a counterfeit-Christian philosophy.

A dangerous trend was established. Soon “false apostles,” “false teachers” and “false brethren” abounded.

A counterfeit Christianity was born.

A different gospel gains ground

The impact of distorted teachings devastated the early Church. For example, Christians in the Roman province of Galatia turned en masse from the teachings of the apostle Paul and to a corrupted, cunningly devised but counterfeit gospel promoted by these false apostles.

Paul described the approach they used and the effect the false teachers had on Christians in Galatia: “I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, *to a different gospel*, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:6-7). The brethren in that area were being swept into one of the many sects making up the emerging false Christianity. Paul had to contend with religious strife generated by Jewish and gentile elements in the Galatian congregations.

These cunning pretenders did not reject outright the gospel Paul taught. They simply perverted aspects of it. Then they seduced the Galatian Christians into accepting *their* gospel—a deadly mixture of truth and error. It contained enough truth to appear righteous and Christian, but it contained sufficient error to prevent any who would accept it from receiving salvation.

Notice Paul’s blistering condemnation of that “different” gospel: “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, *let him be accursed*. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed” (verses 8-9).

A gospel of no law

Jesus warned His apostles this would happen: “Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold” (Matthew 24:11-12). Jesus explained that lawlessness, the key element in the message of the false teachers, would make their ideas appealing and popular. Disregard for God’s law would finally become the foundation of a popular

and successful counterfeit Christianity.

The false prophets devised their message and doctrines by verbally acknowledging Jesus as “Lord” while refusing to obey Him (Luke 6:46). Jesus Himself warned of their deceitful, cunning approach: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:15).

Jesus made it clear that teachers of lawlessness, who outwardly appear as innocent sheep performing devoutly religious acts, are not His apostles or servants: “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘*I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!*’” (verses 22-23).

God’s law: the religious battleground

Controversy over God’s law erupted within the Church as soon as the first gentiles (non-Israelites) were converted. Certain Jewish believers wanted to force circumcision and other physical requirements on the gentiles. They demanded that gentile converts be physically circumcised to receive salvation (Acts 15:1).

The apostles refused. They pointed out that even Moses had taught that the circumcision that made one acceptable to God was a matter of the heart (Deuteronomy 30:6; compare with Romans 2:29 and Colossians 2:11-12). Also, God had declared Abraham to be righteous in His sight before he was circumcised (Romans 4:9-12). Therefore, they explained, physical circumcision should not be regarded as a requirement for the gentiles’ salvation (Acts 15:2, 5-10). For further proof, Peter noted that God had recently given the Holy Spirit to several gentiles without their being circumcised, demonstrating His will in the matter (verse 8; Acts 11:1-4, 15-18).

The same Jews also demanded that gentiles observe the temple ceremonies and rituals that pointed to the sacrifice of Christ. The apostles insisted that Christ’s sacrifice was sufficient for the forgiveness of sins through the grace of God (Hebrews 7:26-27).

The temple sacrifices and rituals were only temporary institutions until the sacrifice of the real “Lamb of God” (John 1:29). The apostles taught that they were no longer required (Acts 15:11; Hebrews

Changes in Christian Scholars' Perspective on God's Law

Regard for God's law in mainstream Christianity has been remarkably inconsistent since the Protestant Reformation. On the one hand, the Ten Commandments have been considered the greatest moral law mankind has ever known. On the other hand, they have usually been regarded as too inconsequential or arbitrary to be obligatory for Christians.

These contradictory views of God's commandments became evident in the 16th century with the theological differences between Martin Luther and John Calvin, the principal founders of Protestant theology.

Calvin believed Christians should keep the Ten Commandments, even though he bowed to tradition by substituting the first day of the week for the seventh day in the Fourth Commandment. Calvin's view, though popular in past centuries, steadily lost ground during the 20th century.

Today most Christian denominations reflect, at least in practice, Luther's view toward the commandments of God. Luther incorrectly assumed that the apostle Paul had rejected the authority of the Old Testament just as Luther had rejected the authority of the Catholic hierarchy of his day. But Luther's perception of Paul's teachings was inaccurate.

Luther saw that Paul taught salvation by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). But Luther took this teaching one step too far, and therein lies the source

of his colossal error that later shaped the views of hundreds of millions of people around the world.

He taught that salvation is by faith *alone*. By this he meant that laws in the Old Testament, including the Ten Commandments, are not binding on Christians. He taught that a simple belief in Christ is sufficient for salvation—that faith alone is all that is necessary. As a result, Luther pitted the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments against each other.

James D.G. Dunn, Lightfoot professor of divinity at the University of Durham, England, explains that Luther's first incorrect assumption was that Paul's personal experience in Judaism was identical to his own experience in the Catholicism of his day. Luther incorrectly assumed Paul was troubled by his personal relationship to God's law.

Dunn then explains: "The trouble with all this is that when Paul speaks explicitly of his own experience before he became a Christian there is nothing of all of this . . . In Philippians 3:6 he states quite simply that prior to his conversion he regarded himself as 'blameless as regards righteousness within the law.' In other words, there is no indication or hint of a period of guilt-ridden anxiety [in Paul], like that suffered by Luther."

"The second assumption Luther made," continues Dunn, "was that the Judaism of Paul's time was just like

the mediaeval Catholicism of Luther's day, at least so far as the teaching about God's justice and justification were concerned. The second assumption was natural, given the first. If Paul had made the same discovery of faith as Luther, then he must also have been reacting against the same misunderstanding as Luther" (*The Justice of God*, 1994, pp. 13-14).

As a result of these inaccurate assumptions, Luther concluded that Christ's death abolished the laws of God in the Old Testament. He mistakenly deduced that Paul taught the same thing.

But that was not what Paul believed or taught. During the past 30 years Paul's obedience to the teachings of the Old Testament Scriptures have been categorically confirmed by many Christian and Jewish scholars.

Here are some comments from scholars on this subject from *Removing Anti-Judaism from the Pulpit* (edited by Howard Kee, emeritus professor of biblical studies at Boston University, and Irvin Borowsky, chairman of the American Interfaith Institute, 1996).

John T. Pawlikowski, a professor at the Catholic Theological Union of Social Ethics, Chicago, says: "The claimed total opposition to Torah [Old Testament teachings] which theologians, especially in the Protestant churches, frequently made the basis for their theological contrast between Christianity and Judaism (freedom/grace vs. Law) now appears to rest on something less than solid ground" (p. 32). Also: "It is now becoming increasingly apparent to biblical

scholars that the lack of a deep immersion into the spirit and content of the Hebrew Scriptures leaves the contemporary Christian with a truncated version of Jesus' message. In effect, what remains is an *emasculated version of biblical spirituality*" (p. 31, emphasis added throughout).

Robert J. Daly, professor of theology and a Jesuit priest, tells us, "Expressed bluntly from the Christian perspective, *to be anti-Jewish is to be anti-Christian*" (p. 52).

Frederick Holmgren, research professor of Old Testament at a Chicago seminary, explains the significance of the discoveries of these scholars: "Despite Jesus' conflict with some interpreters of his day, both Jewish and Christian scholars see him as one who honored and followed the Law." Holmgren also explains that "Jesus embraced the Torah of Moses; he came not to end it but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17)—*to carry its teachings forward*. Further, to those who came to him seeking eternal life, *he held it up as the essential teaching to be observed* (Luke 10:25-28)" (p. 72).

These and other Christian scholars are changing their views of the status of God's laws in New Testament. One cannot help but hope that many others will be encouraged by their example to change their prejudices against obeying the Ten Commandments. However, it is most unlikely this understanding will be widely believed and accepted because "the sinful mind is hostile to God" and "does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:7, NIV).

9:1-15) because they were “concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation” (Hebrews 9:10).

But the apostles never regarded God’s spiritual laws, summarized by the Ten Commandments, as being in the same category with “fleshly ordinances.” They always supported obedience to God’s commandments. Paul made this clear: “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters” (1 Corinthians 7:19). He concluded: “Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law” (Romans 3:31).

Distorted view of God’s grace

Just as Jesus had foretold, unscrupulous teachers pounced on the teachings of Paul and the other apostles and twisted their meaning (2 Peter 3:15-16). By distorting the apostles’ words, first about grace and then about those “fleshly ordinances” that are no longer necessary, they discovered a way to excuse their unlawful behavior. “For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness [shameful behavior] and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ” (Jude 4).

To them, grace excused sin—the breaking of God’s law—by allowing them to disregard scriptural teachings they did not like. They twisted Paul’s explanation that we cannot earn salvation with our own “works” into an excuse for making no effort to obey God.

Peter pinpointed their real problem. They “despise authority”: “They are presumptuous, self-willed. They are not afraid to speak evil of dignitaries . . .” (2 Peter 2:10). A dominant characteristic of these deceivers was their eagerness to verbally attack and undermine the apostles and elders who were the true shepherds of God’s flock.

As a consequence, said Peter, “they have forsaken the right way and gone astray . . .” (verse 15). “For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption . . .” (verses 18-19).

Now a problem even more sinister developed among the scattered congregations of God’s people. False teachers, instead of trying to impose more law on gentiles, began exploiting God’s mercy—the grace of God—to advocate the idea that Christians have been *liberated* from the law and no longer need to obey it. However, God says transgressing His law is sin (1 John 3:4).

These teachers misrepresented God’s law as an unnecessary burden. John responded: “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3).

Contrary to the idea of being *liberated* from law, James calls God’s commandments a “royal law” and the “law of liberty” (James 2:8-12). God designed His law to guarantee freedom from the consequences of such evils as adultery, murder, theft, fraud and covetousness.

It is *sin*, not God’s law, that enslaves us (Romans 6:6). We become free from the enslavement to sin by obeying God (verse 17). Paul explains that obedience and righteousness are inseparable. “For it is not those who *hear* the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who *obey* the law who will be declared righteous” (Romans 2:13, NIV).

Satan the devil: master deceiver

Those who promoted these lawless principles were influenced by Satan. Paul said: “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For *Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light*. Therefore it is no great thing if *his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness*, whose end will be according to their works” (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

Satan hates God’s law. He is a master deceiver. Naturally, he will spare no effort to infiltrate the Church Christ founded.

To accomplish his purpose, Satan uses people to mislead other people. It is easy for him to influence human beings who desire to teach others when they are motivated by personal ambition. This is especially true if they lack a proper understanding of the Scriptures. Satan simply takes advantage of their desire to be spiritual teachers. He seduces susceptible individuals to pay lip service to Christ while

creating their own new sets of doctrines and ignoring or disobeying portions of God's laws.

Paul told Timothy to "charge some that they teach no other doctrine" and have a "pure heart," "good conscience" and "sincere faith, . . . from which some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm" (1 Timothy 1:3, 6-7).

Sincere but misguided religious leaders can and do accept doctrines that permit them to break some of God's commandments. Then they persuade others to believe as they do. Sadly, through the devil's influence, they convince themselves that their misguided concepts are righteous—that God is pleased with them. They believe the false doctrines they teach. Although sincere, they are *sincerely mistaken*.

Paul says, "The coming of the lawless one [a future teacher who will advocate doctrines contrary to God's laws] is according to the working of Satan . . . with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie" (2 Thessalonians 2:9-11). Probably none of the misguided teachers perceives he is in reality advocating Satan's point of view.

However, by creating a counterfeit-Christian religion—one that is not entirely different from the true Church but rejects some of the essential biblical teachings that lead to eternal life—Satan is attempting to thwart God's plan for the salvation of mankind. Remember, Jesus says, "if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:17). That is exactly what the devil wants to prevent. He promotes a lawless Christianity that teaches we can selectively obey—or even ignore—God's commandments.

Lawlessness in varying degrees is the centerpiece of Satan's counterfeit doctrines. His purpose is to convince people that they are serving Christ while cutting them off from salvation by clouding their understanding of *what sin is* so they will continue in sin—so they will practice at least some degree of lawlessness.

To accomplish his purpose, Satan exploits human nature. He sways people to believe his deceptions (1 John 5:19; Revelation 12:9). Satan

retains just enough truth in his doctrines to persuade people they are following Christ. But he introduces sufficient error to prevent them from living the way that would ultimately lead to eternal life.

Why disobedience appeals to human nature

Satan is successful in deceiving humanity for good reason. The apostle Paul explains that the natural mind of man—the mind that is not guided by God's Spirit—cannot always see the purpose behind God's laws. "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, *for they are foolishness to him*; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Most people are not overtly hostile toward many of God's laws. They usually recognize that deeds such as murder and theft are wrong. However, they are hostile—perhaps without recognizing their innate hostility—toward laws that challenge their own personal, natural way of thinking. In that sense lawlessness appeals to people.

Paul explains why disobedience can appeal to our baser instincts: ". . . The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Romans 8:7). The carnal, or fleshly, mind not only lacks spiritual discernment, it resents God's authority as expressed in His laws. The New International Version translates this verse: ". . . The sinful mind *is hostile to God*. It does not submit to God's law, *nor can it do so*."

We call this sinful tendency *human nature*—a combination of human weakness and acquired attitudes resulting from Satan's influence on people. Satan exploits human nature. He uses his false teachers to convince other people that they are "liberated" from the laws of God, thus excusing their tendency to be hostile toward God's laws. So, rather than abandoning a life of lawlessness, those led astray by this deception continue in sin. Thinking their disobedient actions are permissible to God, they fail to recognize, at least in some of their beliefs and behavior, the gravity of their sinful actions.

But the apostle James makes it clear that this approach and attitude to God's royal law are entirely wrong. "For whoever shall keep the whole law and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10). The context shows James is speaking of the Ten Commandments (verses 8-9, 11). God's fundamental law is made up of 10

points, and He requires us to observe them all—in letter and spirit.

A falling away from truth begins

Christ praised the church in Ephesus for refusing to follow false apostles who tried to take advantage of their human nature and seduce them. “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars” (Revelation 2:2).

But not everyone in every congregation followed the example of the church in Ephesus. Many accepted the teachings of the false apostles and reverted to sinning. That is why Peter wrote: “For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them” (2 Peter 2:20-21).

People began turning away from the teachings of Christ’s true apostles. They accepted the philosophies of false teachers. Peter had explicitly warned that this would occur. He said false teachers would arise “among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. *And many will follow their destructive ways*, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed” (2 Peter 2:1-2).

Peter anticipated that not just a few—but *many*—Christians would turn aside from the truth to follow doctrines that were more appealing to the carnal mind. Later John confirms this happened. “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us” (1 John 2:19).

Barnabas and Saul (later renamed Paul) encountered a false prophet determined to turn people away from the truth. “Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus . . . But Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, seeking to turn the

proconsul away from the faith” (Acts 13:6-8).

On other occasions the problem lay with false brethren (Galatians 2:4). Paul referred to his trials “in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among *false brethren*” (2 Corinthians 11:26).

These false Christians had not become a genuine threat just to Paul’s safety and effectiveness, but they had also become a significant part of the visible Christian community. Some may have finally gone out from God’s special people but continued calling themselves Christian. Others became members of new and supposedly liberated sects that retained the name Christian. Still others probably remained in the fellowship of true believers and over time subverted congregations to their own heretical teachings.

A false Christianity was beginning to take a firm hold.

True Christians forced out of congregations

As the teachings of false ministers gained in popularity, their followers gradually grew to be the majority in some congregations. The apostle John records one such tragic example: “I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, *putting them out of the church*” (3 John 9-10).

Incredible as it sounds, those who were faithful to the teaching of the apostles were *expelled* from this congregation. They had become the minority. The majority had chosen to follow Diotrephes, who, in his own lust for power and influence, falsely accused the apostle John. Satan had succeeded in placing his minister over this congregation, expelling the faithful servants of Jesus Christ.

Remember, Jesus had already warned His true servants that this would happen: “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly

Early Trends That Affected the Future of the Church

In Revelation 2 and 3 Jesus Christ sends a different message to each of seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (Asia Minor), part of modern Turkey.

The number *seven* shows completeness, just as seven days make a complete week. The seven messages of Revelation 2 and 3 paint us a comprehensive picture of trends that had already begun and would continue through the history of the Church—trends that would dramatically shape its future. The seven messages give us several good indications why the deep divisions among Christians developed and why this divisiveness continued to plague subsequent generations.

The seven congregations are represented as seven candlesticks in Revelation 1. Together they represent the Church and its mission to be the light of the world (Matthew 5:14).

Christ stands in the midst of the seven congregations as the source of their light. He is always present and accessible. He will make good His promise always to be with His Church until the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). But, as is obvious from the messages to the seven congregations, not everyone who comes into the Church will remain *faithful to Him*.

The seven messages accurately reflect conditions in the Church as it existed in the first century. But they are also prophetic; they reveal some

of the reasons for later divisions.

Each of the seven congregations receives a warning: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Each congregation's message is a warning to the other six congregations: The same or similar conditions could develop among them.

In each message Christ cites examples of obedience and disobedience among His followers, showing whom He will bless and whom He will reject. He lavishes compliments where approval is due. He criticizes the unrepentant for faults that threaten their relationship with Him.

The Church, when the messages were written, was suffering trials, persecution and imprisonment. Antipas, a local resident and martyr, had already been killed. Christ encourages the congregations not to lose heart, not to quit, not to compromise their beliefs, and—if necessary—to be willing die for His sake. He reminds them to look ahead to the era of the Kingdom of God, when they will help Him rule the world in righteousness.

Jesus compliments the devoted members for their service, labor, patience, perseverance, endurance and faith. However, His criticisms and some of His other compliments are revealing. They show that the threat from *within* the Church was—and

always will be—cause for concern.

Many members of these congregations had remained faithful in spite of many hardships and trials. But others had lost their first love. Some are lukewarm and spiritually blind—badly needing salve for their eyes so they can see their deteriorating spiritual condition. Christ warns them: "... I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works" (Revelation 2:23).

Besides the growing problem of spiritually weak members, false prophets were infiltrating the congregations. Doctrinal errors were developing. The doctrine of Balaam, the teachings of the Nicolaitans and the beguiling influence of Jezebel are mentioned. Jesus tells the Christians in Thyatira: "Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols" (verse 20).

Dissent was developing from within. That was the real threat to the Church. Attending with members of these congregations were two types of people. The faithful members are those "who cannot bear those who are evil" and "have not known the depths of Satan" (verses 2, 24). But the implication is clear that others *could* and *did* "bear those who were evil," and some were beginning to plumb "the depths of Satan."

We find a portrait of the Church near the end of the apostolic era.

Satan had successfully infiltrated congregations raised up by the apostles. He lures people away from the faith of Christ, using false prophets to introduce his attitudes and teachings.

But, in spite of the devil's efforts, many of the brethren remained strong and faithful, holding fast to the apostles' teachings. Christ complimented them: "... You have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars" (verse 2).

Others, who had lost interest, were beguiled by the heresies of Satan—a being "who deceives the whole world" (Revelation 12:9). One entire congregation was already spiritually dead, having only a few members who were not already too defiled to count as converted Christians. Satan had succeeded in taking over a large portion of Christianity.

So here we find, from Christ's own messages to His Church, that two distinct classifications of Christians emerged from the apostolic era. One group was faithful; the other consisted of people who, for many reasons, were moving further and further away from the true faith of God.

Many who were unfaithful ultimately departed from God's truth. "They went out from us," says John, "but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us" (1 John 2:19).

Two distinct religions developed from the apostolic era: one faithful to Christ, the other deceived by Satan.

they are ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:13-15).

He also said: “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They *worship me in vain*; their teachings are but *rules taught by men*.’ You have *let go of the commands of God* and are *holding on to the traditions of men*” (Mark 7:6-8, NIV).

Now we can understand why Paul explained to Christians in Rome the appropriate response to those who were stirring up division within the Church. “Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them” (Romans 16:17).

Counterfeit Christianity dominates

By the end of the third century the true servants of God had become a distinct minority among those who called themselves Christians. The counterfeit Christianity had become the majority.

False teachers had successfully gained a far larger following than the faithful ministers of God. However, history shows the counterfeit sects were not united in their beliefs. Many factions existed among them.

Nevertheless, divided and unconverted as it was, this new brand of Christianity rapidly expanded its membership and became the visible Christian church. Purporting to offer salvation, but without the necessity of real repentance, it held just enough truth to appeal to the masses.

In spite of its faults, it appeared to offer a hope unequalled by any pagan religion at that time. None of the pagan religions offered a believable way for people to receive forgiveness of sins and obtain eternal life. This new religion seemed to offer just that. Little did its followers realize that its promises, without real repentance, were made in vain.

By the end of the third century this counterfeit Christianity was a squabbling, bitterly divided religion. But at the beginning of the fourth century two things happened that abruptly altered the course of Christian history. First, the Roman emperor Diocletian intensified the policy of many previous Roman emperors of persecuting Christians and ordered that all Christian manuscripts be burned. This dramatically renewed a climate of fear throughout the Christian community.

Ten years later another emperor, Constantine, came to power. He

had defeated another powerful contender for the right to replace Diocletian as emperor, but he still had many enemies, and his political position remained insecure. In all the empire, only Christians were unaligned politically. Constantine immediately saw an opportunity to use this formerly persecuted and politically alienated religious body to strengthen his hold on the empire.

First he legalized Christianity. Then, only two years later, he called all the divided professing-Christian groups together to hammer out a unified system of belief. He wanted a united religious body that was politically committed to him.

To achieve this, Constantine presided over doctrinal deliberations and dictated statements of belief whenever disagreements could not be resolved amicably. He soon successfully molded the bickering groups of counterfeit Christians who were willing to accept state control into a strong and unified vassal of the Roman Empire.

Williston Walker, former professor of ecclesiastical history at Yale University, tells us that, in 323, “Constantine was at last the sole ruler of the Roman world. The church was everywhere free from persecution . . . But, in winning its freedom from its enemies, it had come largely under the control of the occupant of the Roman imperial throne. A fateful union with the state had begun” (*A History of the Christian Church*, 1946, p. 111).

A religion transformed through syncretism

As this new religion—now supported by the Roman emperors—grew in power and influence, it sought to become a truly universal church. In its ambition to add more members, many new converts—and many new practices—were welcomed into its fold.

Charles Guignebert, professor of the history of Christianity at the University of Paris, described the process: “Now at the beginning of the fifth century, the ignorant and the semi-Christians thronged into the Church in numbers . . . They had forgotten none of their pagan customs . . . The bishops of that period had to content themselves with redressing, as best they could, and in experimental fashion, the shocking malformations of the Christian faith which they perceived around them . . .

“[Properly instructing converts] was out of the question; they had

to be content with teaching them no more than the symbol of baptism and then baptizing them en masse, postponing until a later date the task of eradicating their superstitions, which they preserved intact . . . This ‘later date’ never arrived, and the Church adapted to herself, as well as she could, them and their customs and beliefs. On their side, they were content to *dress up their paganism in a Christian cloak*” (*The Early History of Christianity*, 1927, p. 208-210, emphasis added throughout).

What was the result? This state-dominated Christianity became a bizarre synthesis of beliefs, practices and customs from many sources.

As Guignebert explained: “It is sometimes very difficult to tell exactly from which pagan rite a particular Christian rite is derived, but it remains certain that the spirit of *pagan ritualism* became *impressed upon Christianity*, to such an extent that at last *the whole of it might be found distributed through its ceremonies*” (p. 121).

In those early centuries the counterfeit Christianity that the apostles of Jesus Christ had fought so hard to contain grew in size and popularity. In later centuries this religion would fragment repeatedly into competing denominations. Tragically, however, none completely returned to the original practices and teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles. This fact is recognized by many modern biblical scholars. (See “Changes in Christian Scholars’ Perspective on God’s Law,” p. 44.)

Meanwhile, those who, through these many centuries, have faithfully continued to yield their lives to God in sincere obedience to His laws are still, comparatively speaking, only a “little flock” in a confused world.

The Church of God Today

“Therefore by their fruits you will know them. Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:20-21).

Jesus promised His Church that the “gates of Hades”—the grave—would never prevail against it. The true Church of God would not die out; it would survive any attempts to destroy it.

How can you find that true Church of God, the Church Jesus built? How can you locate God’s special people in the midst of the splintered and fractured faith that we know as Christianity? What distinguishes them from those to whom Jesus Christ said, “I never knew you”? (Matthew 7:23).

To answer these questions we need to understand an important lesson Jesus explained in a parable.

A lesson from a tax collector

To recognize the distinction between converted servants of God and those whose righteousness is measured by their traditions or opinions, we must see beyond impressive outward appearances. In His parable about the Pharisee and the publican (tax collector), Jesus shows how to discern the traits with which God is impressed as compared with the characteristics that tend to impress people (Luke 18:9-14).

In this parable the Pharisee sets an impressive example. He appears the model of godliness, one who does all the right things. He faithfully tithes and spurns injustice and immorality. He fasts and prays regularly and frequently. That he thanks God for his righteousness indicates a conviction that his own religious approach to life is pleasing to God. He sees himself as a righteous man. No doubt he greatly impresses others as well.

The tax collector, however, holds a far different view of himself—and has a far different reputation. Anyone would have suspected him of being corrupt, filled with greed and graft. Hardly anyone would have trusted the tax official; most people would have avoided him like a disease.

Yet, in this parable, who is the genuine servant of God? The tax collector is the one who truly repents and recognizes his insignificance compared with God. He sees his past for what it is. He admits his sins and humbly asks forgiveness. He displays an attitude similar to that of Christ—“not My will, but Yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). A spiritual transformation occurs in his life.

But the Pharisee, confidently believing himself to be a true servant of God, remains blinded to his own spiritual condition. He believes his approach to God is right, convincing himself that he is pleasing God. But he has no comprehension of true repentance. He is among those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others” (Luke 18:9).

Who would you have chosen as God’s servant if you had been asked to decide between the Pharisee and the tax collector? Would you have correctly discerned the one who was acceptable to God? Or would you have been impressed by the apparent righteousness of the Pharisee because he appeared to be an outstanding spiritual example, a member of one of the most prestigious religious groups among his people?

We must realize that God views people differently from the way we view them. We can see the outside of a person, but God sees inside people. “For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, *but the LORD looks at the heart*” (1 Samuel 16:7).

How Paul was deceived

The apostle Paul is a classic example of a man who learned his

lesson—because of his own experiences. Paul had been a Pharisee, a member of one of the most strict Jewish groups of his day. He was sincere in what he believed and practiced. He summed up his own zeal and adherence to the precepts he had learned as a Pharisee:

“If anyone makes claims [of righteousness in the flesh], I can make a stronger case for myself: circumcised on the eighth day, Israelite by race, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born and bred; in my practice of the law a Pharisee, in zeal for religion a persecutor of the church, by the law’s standard of righteousness without fault” (Philippians 3:4-6, Revised English Bible).

Paul explained the reason for the existence of the spiritual blindness he had so zealously represented: “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have *a zeal for God*, but *not according to knowledge*. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, *have not submitted to the righteousness of God*” (Romans 10:1-3).

This is a common problem. Paul persecuted the Church of God because of his spiritual blindness and self-righteousness. Later he thanked “Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Timothy 1:12-13).

Paul, a devout Pharisee, was sincere. But he was *sincerely wrong*. After God opened his mind he could see just how wrong he had been.

The condition of Christianity

The highly visible, popular Christianity of our age abounds with Christians who are much like Paul was before God called him to repentance. They are sincere but lack understanding of the righteousness of God. Like the Pharisee in Christ’s parable, they cannot believe they could possibly be wrong. They neglect obedience to God’s law because of their lack of understanding—having been victimized by a false gospel—yet they are sincerely convinced they are serving Jesus Christ.

Like Paul before God called him, they do not recognize sin in

themselves. Because of their lack of understanding, they do not even know *what sin really is*. If asked for the biblical definition of sin, most would have no idea how or where God defines sin in the Bible.

As those who came before them, they follow “traditions of men” in place of the commandments of God. They have been blinded through Satan’s pervasive influence on people’s beliefs.

Many of them are sincere. They have learned enough about the purpose of Christ’s life, death and resurrection to understand some of God’s plan to save mankind. Many read the Bible regularly and sincerely want to please God. But, sadly, they, like Paul before God called him, remain blinded to the real meaning of sin, repentance and conversion.

Is the knowledge they have gained and the respect they have for the Bible all in vain? No. When God opens their eyes to truth and they willingly acknowledge their mistakes, they will recognize the true definition of sin and repent.

The advantage of knowing the Bible

When the Church of God began on that Day of Pentecost long ago, it originated among the only people on earth who were intimately familiar with the Holy Scriptures. Knowledge of those Scriptures gave them a tremendous advantage.

Paul asks: “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God” (Romans 3:1-2, NIV).

Paul’s fellow Israelites held to inaccurate ideas about many important parts of Scripture (as is the case with many people who consider themselves Christians today). But most of them had at least learned many basic truths. That was their advantage.

Biblical knowledge provides an advantage—to an individual, to a community, to a whole nation. Anyone who knows the Bible has gained an advantage. Those who *practice* what they know have an even greater advantage.

Having already acquired much biblical knowledge in their homes and synagogues, Paul’s countrymen had a foundation on which they could build. What they had learned was not wasted. Gentiles who

had no knowledge of the true God or His ways had no such foundation. (Yet, according to Romans 2:14-15, some gentiles had a willing and obedient attitude even without proper knowledge—to the embarrassment of disobedient Israelites who knew the law.)

But the principle applies. And so it is with those who believe the Bible is God’s Word but think they can pick and choose which biblical teachings they wish to apply to their own lives. They have been taught to ignore some of the commandments of God and accept the traditions of men. But many of them are at least familiar with the Bible. That is of great value.

Having knowledge of the Bible can provide the same advantage to them as it did to the Jews of Paul’s day. But, to capitalize on that advantage, they must *learn to understand the Bible correctly* and let it be their *ultimate guide in belief and practice*. A false Christianity, under the influence of Satan, has misled the many, and only those few who obey God are His special people.

Examine your own understanding

You may be much like the Jews Paul wrote about. Maybe you, although familiar with the Bible, are only beginning to understand its basic teachings. Maybe you are just now learning the importance of keeping God’s commandments, real repentance, the destiny of mankind, the Kingdom of God, the meaning of salvation and what the Church of God that Jesus built really is.

If you are already familiar with the Bible, you have a distinct advantage. Continue to study it, diligently adding to what you know and correcting what you have misunderstood. If you are unfamiliar with the Bible, it will be to your advantage to learn what it teaches. It contains knowledge essential to salvation (2 Timothy 3:15-17). (For additional help, be sure to request *Is the Bible True?* and *How to Understand the Bible*. Both booklets are yours free for the asking.)

Above all else, let God correct you through His Word. Have the attitude of David: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24, NRSV).

If you wish to find the true Church of God that Christ built—

those “special people of God”—you need to know what you are seeking. You need to know the key characteristics that identify God’s people.

You shall know them by their fruits

More than any other factor, it is the fruits of God’s people that tell the story. “Therefore by their fruits you will know them,” says Jesus. “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:20-21).

You want to locate other people who are special to God because *they do God’s will*. That is the fruit that Jesus says is most important. He also says, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). The special people of God not only do God’s will, they do it “because the love of God has been poured out in [their] hearts by the Holy Spirit [which] was given to [them]” (Romans 5:5).

To God, *love* and *obedience* are inseparable. “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). Paul states the same thought in different words: “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10, NRSV).

The power of the Holy Spirit causes the love of God to flow through His people within the channel of His law. His law defines and directs love. Doing anything contrary to God’s law is the antithesis of love. For example, committing murder, adultery or theft breaks God’s law. Doing any of those things shows a lack of love to God and neighbor.

How important is the relationship between love and obedience? It is the key that distinguishes the true people of God from those deceived by Satan. “In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:10).

Love and doing go together. They are inseparable. Both are essential for the true followers of Christ.

James says: “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not

a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:22-25).

God will not accept mere lip service. Jesus said, “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me” (Matthew 15:8). He also said, “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things” (Matthew 12:35).

The hearts and minds of God’s servants are transformed by His Spirit so they want to obey Him. They willingly submit to and obey God. Serving God is a way of life, not an empty ritual. True Christians believe God, and they practice what they believe.

The evidence of their obedience can be readily observed in the fruits of their lives. Truly you can know them “by their fruits,” especially the fruits of love and obedience. (For a fuller explanation of love and obedience, request our free booklet *The Ten Commandments*.)

How God’s laws define love

Everything God requires of His people, and every tenet of right living in the Bible, is founded on two basic principles: *loving God* and *loving our fellowman*.

One man asked Jesus, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” (Matthew 22:36). Jesus answered: “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (verses 37-40).

God’s special people understand the Scriptures. They know that the design and purpose of God’s law are based on loving God and loving other people. They understand that treating others as God commands is love.

Through Moses, God asked ancient Israel, “. . . What does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to

walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good?” (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

This is simply an expanded version of the first great commandment cited by Jesus Christ: Love God with all your heart, soul and mind. Notice, too, that loving God and obeying God are inseparably linked. Loving God is demonstrated by obeying God’s laws, which He gave for our good.

Continuing, we see a similar expansion of the second great commandment. “Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer. For the LORD your God . . . shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. Therefore love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (verses 16-19).

God’s message, in the Old and New Testaments, is simple. Since God shows no partiality but loves all people, including persons unlikely to receive much respect—foreigners, orphans, widows—He commands His followers to treat these people according to the instructions in His law.

The obedient and converted of God

Revelation 12 pictures the people of God as a woman under attack by Satan (verse 13). The setting of this prophecy is just before the return of Jesus Christ. “And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, *who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ*” (verse 17).

Notice that the Church is described as keeping God’s commandments and holding fast to everything that Jesus taught. This demonstrates that the Church Jesus built has always obeyed the commandments of God and will continue to do so even until the time of Christ’s return to earth.

This passage makes it clear that it is impossible for a Church to claim to know God and disregard the need to obey His commandments. The apostle John makes this plain: “Now by this we know

that we know Him, *if we keep His commandments*. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar [Greek *pseustes*, a falsifier, one who breaks faith, a false and faithless person], and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him” (1 John 2:3-5).

The Church is made up of obedient people who diligently strive to obey Christ’s instruction to live “by every word of God” (Luke 4:4). They are people who regularly go to God in prayer for the strength and power they need to please God and grow in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18).

The people of God are converted; they have received God’s Spirit (Romans 8:9). They understand when and how God gives His Spirit—that one must first *repent and be baptized* (Acts 2:38). They know that baptism without repentance is merely an empty, invalid ritual.

For example, the apostle Paul had to rebaptize some people who had previously been baptized but lacked sufficient understanding to be truly converted (Acts 19:1-5). They had been immersed in water, but they did not receive the Holy Spirit until Paul properly counseled and rebaptized them.

True conversion requires a basic understanding of repentance and the meaning of baptism. (For a full explanation of repentance, baptism and conversion, be sure to request your free copy of *The Road to Eternal Life*.)

Satan’s deception has led to false conversions

Those who “accept Christ” but have no comprehension of what sin is, and who lack real repentance, have a false conversion. Here is where Satan’s deception has been the most successful. Jesus said plainly that many would follow false prophets, accepting a false conversion.

How can this happen? It happens because few people understand *what sin is*. They have been taught that they can selectively obey, that full obedience to God’s laws is no longer necessary. They have believed a *false gospel* that, at its core, teaches we can disregard parts or all of God’s law.

Satan has persuaded people to “believe on Christ” *without understanding what He taught*. He has convinced them to accept the idea

What Did the Early Church Believe and Practice?

The book of Acts is an eyewitness account of the early Church from Christ's death until about A.D. 60. Chapter 2 records the beginning of the Church, when God sent His Spirit to 120 followers of Jesus Christ.

Many Bible readers are familiar with the miraculous events of that day—of the house in which they met filling with the sound of a mighty wind and what appeared to be tongues of fire alighting on those gathered there. Another miracle occurred as those people, now filled with God's Spirit, began to speak in the languages of people from many lands so that all could understand their words.

Often overlooked in this account is the day on which these events occurred, the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1), one of the festivals God commanded for His people many centuries before (Leviticus 23). In revealing these festivals, God said that "these are *My feasts . . . the feasts of the LORD*, holy convocations . . ." (verses 2, 4). God proclaimed that these festivals were to be "*a statute forever throughout your generations*" (verses 14, 21, 31, 41).

The Gospels show that Jesus Christ kept the same festivals (Matthew 26:17-19; John 7:10-14, 37-38). Both the book of Acts and Paul's letters show the apostles keeping these festivals during the decades after Christ's crucifixion (Acts 2:1-4;

18:21; 20:6, 16; 27:9).

Most churches teach that the festivals were "nailed to the cross," that they were somehow annulled by Christ's death. Yet the unmistakable record of the Bible is that the early Church continued to observe them, but with greater grasp of their spiritual significance.

Speaking of one of these God-given feasts, the apostle Paul urged the church in Corinth—a mixed group of gentile and Jewish believers—to "keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:8). Paul clearly was referring to the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:6; Deuteronomy 16:16).

Paul explained the significance of the Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7; Leviticus 23:5) and gave instructions on how to properly observe this ceremony (1 Corinthians 11:23-28).

The many references in the Gospels, Acts and Paul's epistles prompt an obvious question: Since Jesus, the apostles and the early Church kept these days, *why don't churches teach and observe them today?* After all, Paul directly tied the feasts to Jesus, His purpose and His sacrifice for mankind (1 Corinthians 5:7).

The Gospels and the book of Acts are equally clear that Christ, the disciples and the early Church kept the weekly Sabbath—from Friday evening

to Saturday evening, the seventh day of the week—as their day of rest and worship (Mark 6:2; Luke 4:16, 31-32; 13:10; Acts 13:14-44; 18:4). Jesus even called Himself "Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28).

It was Jesus' custom to go to the synagogue every Sabbath to worship (Luke 4:16). Contrary to the teaching of those who say that Paul abandoned the Sabbath, it was his custom, too, to go to the synagogue every Sabbath (Acts 17:1-3), using the opportunity to teach others about Jesus Christ.

The weekly Sabbath is another of God's festivals, like those mentioned earlier. It is, in fact, the *first* of His feasts listed (Leviticus 23:1-4). It is included in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

As with God's other feasts, the Sabbath is ignored by the overwhelming majority of churches. Rather than keeping the Sabbath as God commanded, most churches meet on the *first* day of the week—Sunday—a day nowhere commanded in the Bible as a day of worship. *Why?* If we are to observe any day as a weekly day of rest and worship, shouldn't it be the same day Jesus Christ and the apostles kept?

We find other differences in teaching and practice. Many churches teach that obedience to God's law is unnecessary, that Christ kept it for us or it was "nailed to the cross" with Christ. This is directly contrary to Jesus' own words (Matthew 4:4; 5:17-19) and the teaching and practice of the apostles (Acts 24:14; 25:8; Romans 7:12, 22;

1 Corinthians 7:19; 2 Timothy 3:15-17).

Following Christ's example, the apostles powerfully preached about Jesus Christ's return to establish the coming Kingdom of God (Luke 4:43; 8:1; 21:27, 31; Acts 1:3; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 28:23, 31). But Paul warned that, even in his day, some were already preaching "a different gospel" (2 Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 1:6).

We see much confusion in churches about what the gospel is. Most view it as a message about Christ's birth, life and death without really understanding *why* He came and *why* He had to die and without proclaiming the message of God's Kingdom that Christ Himself taught (Mark 1:14-15).

Similarly, Jesus and the apostles did not teach that the righteous ascend to heaven at death (John 3:13; Acts 2:29, 34), and they understood that man does not possess an immortal soul (Ezekiel 18:4, 20; Matthew 10:28) that would spend eternity in either heaven or hell.

Nowhere do we find popular religious holidays such as Christmas approved in the Bible. The only time Easter is mentioned in the Bible (Acts 12:4, King James Version), it is a blatant mistranslation of the Greek word for Passover. Lent and its practices are nowhere found.

These are some of the major differences between the Christianity of the time of Christ and the apostles and that commonly practiced today. Shouldn't you look into your Bible to see if your beliefs and practices square with what Jesus Christ and the apostles practiced and taught?

that the Bible is God's Word while believing they can receive salvation without repenting of disobeying God's laws. Through such deceptions the devil has promoted a multitude of false conversions and created a Christianity lacking God's Spirit—an unconverted Christianity!

The Church today

The Church Jesus built is a truly converted body of people who have repented of their disregard for God's laws. They have been transformed by baptism and the receiving of God's Spirit. They rely, in faith, on Jesus Christ to help them live by every word of God.

The Church today is the vehicle Jesus Christ uses to proclaim the truth about the coming Kingdom of God to the world (Matthew 24:14). It is the family God is building—His own children—who will receive eternal life at Christ's return (1 John 3:1-2; 1 Corinthians 15:51-53).

As children of God, the Church anticipates a “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). Its members eagerly await the return of Jesus Christ so they can assist Him in bringing true repentance and salvation to the world (Luke 11:2; Revelation 3:21).

To fulfill their mission and maintain the closeness and unity that Christ expects of them, the members of His Church regularly assemble together as commanded in the Scriptures (Exodus 20:8-11). They take seriously the admonition: “And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

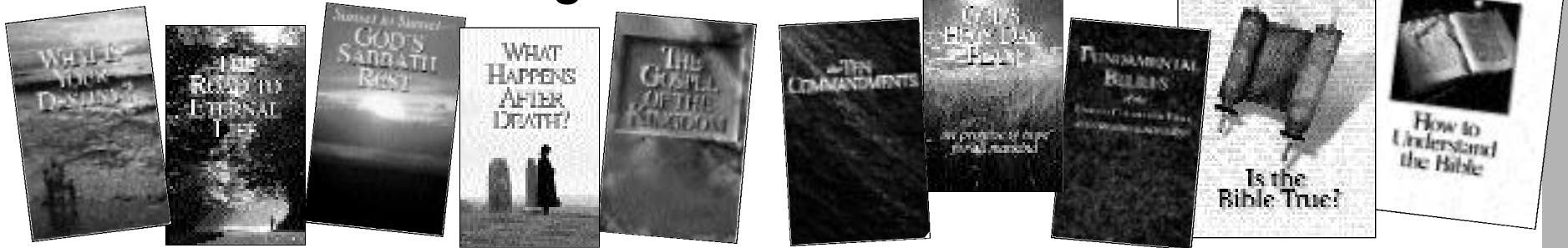
The Church assembles together on the seventh-day Sabbath, as was the custom of Jesus Christ and the apostles (Luke 4:16, 31-32; Acts 13:14, 42, 44). Its members strive to follow the example of Jesus and the apostles in all things (1 John 2:6; 1 Corinthians 11:1).

The members of United Church of God are dedicated to preserving and proclaiming “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 1:3, NRSV). Congregations of the United Church of God, an International Association, are striving to do their part in

fulfilling the mission Christ gave to His Church.

We meet in major cities around the world. We are zealously committed to obeying God, loving one another and completing the Church's mission of spreading the true gospel of the Kingdom of God. All who desire to learn the truth, to obey God and fellowship with others of like mind and spirit are always welcome.

Free for the Asking!



Does the Bible *Really* Say That?

If you've finished reading this booklet, you've probably been surprised, maybe even shocked, to find out some of the things the Bible *really* teaches. But there's much, much more that's rarely taught or discussed in most churches—and when it is taught, it often doesn't square with what the Bible says!

You need to discover what the Bible *really* says for yourself. And don't take our word for it—look it up in the pages of your own Bible and *prove for yourself* what it really teaches.

This booklet has touched on many subjects that are vitally important to understanding God's purpose for humanity and for you. Many other booklets are available that discuss these crucial topics in much greater detail. All are yours free for the asking when you contact one of our offices. As always, there is never any cost or obligation, and no one will call on you.

- The Bible is the foundation for Christianity. But is it really the inspired Word of God? Can you know for sure? How can you understand the Bible? Be sure to request ***Is the Bible True?*** and ***How to Understand the Bible***, which address these vital questions.

- For more information about repentance and conversion—and the awesome purpose of human life—request your free copy of the booklets ***What Is Your Destiny?*** and ***The Road to Eternal Life***.

- To understand which day is the biblical Sabbath—the day set aside in the Bible for regular weekly rest and worship services—write or call for your free copy of ***Sunset to Sunset: God's Sabbath Rest***. You'll also learn why God wants His people to assemble together and why this most neglected of the Ten Commandments

is so important to our relationship with God.

- The foundation of right human behavior is the Ten Commandments. But why are they so important? What makes them any different from any other rules or guidelines? Do they have a deeper meaning that most people miss? Be sure to request your free copy of ***The Ten Commandments***.

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- What is the true gospel Jesus Christ taught and commanded His Church to proclaim to the world? What is the "different gospel" the apostle Paul warned Church members not to accept? Is it possible that most of Christianity accepts and teaches a different gospel from the one Jesus Christ taught? Request your free copy of ***The Gospel of the Kingdom*** to discover the answers.

- The United Church of God, an International Association, draws its beliefs and practices from the Scriptures. If you would like to learn more about our beliefs and their biblical foundation, you'll find them summarized in the booklet ***Fundamental Beliefs of the United Church of God***. We'll be glad to send you a free copy.

All literature published by the United Church of God, an International Association, is provided to the public free for the asking.

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If You'd Like to Know More...

Who we are

This literature is published by the United Church of God, *an International Association*, which has ministers and congregations throughout much of the world.

We trace our origins to the Church that Jesus founded in the early first century. We follow the same teachings, doctrines and practices established then. Our commission is to proclaim the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God to all the world as a witness and to teach all nations to observe what Christ commanded (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).

Free of charge

Jesus Christ said, "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). The United Church of God offers this and other publications free of charge. We are grateful for the generous tithes and offerings of the members of the Church and other supporters who voluntarily contribute to support this work.

We do not solicit the general public

for funds. However, contributions to help us share this message of hope with others are welcomed. All funds are audited annually by an independent accounting firm.

Personal counsel available

Jesus commanded His followers to feed His sheep (John 21:15-17). To fulfill this command, the United Church of God has congregations around the world. In these congregations believers assemble to be instructed from the Scriptures and to fellowship.

The United Church of God is committed to understanding and practicing New Testament Christianity. We desire to share God's way of life with those who earnestly seek to worship and follow our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our ministers are available to counsel, answer questions and explain the Bible. If you would like to contact a minister or visit one of our congregations, please feel free to write or call us at our office in your country or the country nearest you.

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