

Where Are The First Century Churches? - Part 1

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From the time that a child first enters grade school, he is exposed to a barrage of carefully selected "power words" such as self-worth, pride, achievement, reward, potential, accomplishment, responsibility, winner, leader, failure, loser, etc. As he continues to grow, he is slowly introduced to the idea that when he reaches a certain age, he will be expected to accept without question, his place within the ranks of the worldwide system of slavery that is controlled by the rich and the powerful. Upon completing their formal education, anyone who is of an able mind and body, and who resists being placed in this plastic mold of humanity, is quickly condemned by his peers, branded a renegade, a misfit and a rebel, and accused of being a deadhead, a parasite, a sponge, lazy, mentally-unbalanced, and an assortment of other derogatory terms.

For those sincere Christians who are seeking to live the Life of Faith, this presents quite a problem. In fact, it places them in direct conflict with those people who blindly uphold and defend the mottos of their masters. How ironic it is that the children of the world are so quick to honor people who dedicate fifty years or more of their lives to their company, or to science, or to the arts, or to politics, or to military service, or to some other "noble" human cause, while at the same time, they belittle and criticize those people who choose to dedicate their lives in selfless service to God, as well as to their fellow man. For people who choose the ways of the world, the secular system has all kinds of monetary rewards, certificates of achievement, honorary degrees, statuettes, plaques, etc., to "immortalize" that person's achievements. Sadly, many of these people fail miserably to abide by the wise counsel that is found within the pages of the Holy Bible. One example is the following quote taken from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Colossians:

"Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth."

Colossians 3:2, KJV

The reason why these people build their castles of sand upon the Earth is because they lack the Spirit of God; and thus they cannot discern the true importance of the things of the Spirit. They are just like the worldly followers of Nimrod in the Old Testament who wanted to build an Earthly kingdom

and make a name for themselves, instead of honoring and obeying the one true God. Thus began the Babylonian kingdom at Babel. Consider the following verses:

"And Cush begat Nimrod: he began to be a mighty one in the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD: wherefore it is said, Even as Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD. And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar . . . And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

Genesis 10:8-10, 11:1-4, KJV

As you may know, the Lord did not look favorably upon this blatant defiance of His sovereignty; and thus He put a stop to their foolish ways by dividing them with the confusion of tongues, as we see by these verses:

"And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth."

Genesis 11:5-9, KJV

Approximately four thousand years have passed since the above incident occurred; and ever since then, man has continued to go his own rebellious way by slowly building his worldwide kingdom of violence and Babylonian confusion. I am reminded of the following verses that are found in Psalm Two:

"Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us."

Psalms 2:1-3, KJV

As I point out in some of my articles which deal with the Endtime, it is possible that very soon, man may ultimately realize his desire for a worldwide empire in the form of the Kingdom of Darkness of the Beast; but as in times past, the Bible informs us that the Lord will come down from Heaven and will utterly smite their towers -- or skyscrapers -- of sand. Consider these Old Testament verses:

"And there shall be upon every high mountain, and upon every high hill, rivers and streams of waters in the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall."

Isaiah 30:25, KJV

"And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set

up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever."

Daniel 2:44, KJV

So again, the reason why evil men engage in this so-called "empire-building", is simply because they lack spiritual depth. All they can see is what is here and now; that is, the temporal and carnal things of this Earth. Such men are totally blind to the realities of the Spirit World; either that, or they knowingly rebel against their Maker. This is exactly what the Apostle Paul stated when he wrote to the carnal-minded Corinthians who were having some very serious problems in certain areas. Consider this:

"But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

1 Corinthians 2:14, KJV

While man has set up his own status system of recognition and rewards upon the Earth, the Lord has done the same in the Halls of Heaven; and it is very different from what most people would expect. In his Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul wrote the following:

"And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:"

Ephesians 4:11-13, KJV

In his first Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul also made the following comments concerning the Body of Christ, and the diversity of members and positions which are found within it. He points out that all of these are necessary for the edification of the Body as a whole:

"Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues."

1 Corinthians 12:22-28, KJV

Regardless of what our personal calling may be, it should be clear that the Lord esteems all of these positions as worthy vocations, regardless of what worldly men may think or say. Consider again the words of the Apostle Paul:

"Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good

profession before many witnesses."

1 Timothy 6:12, KJV

"I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,"

Ephesians 4:1, KJV

Thus, we should never doubt for a moment, that in God's eyes, being a servant of the Lord in any capacity is indeed a very honorable and legitimate profession. It is a job, and it is a hard job, usually with very little or no Earthly recognition. While we may not be honored by worldly men, the Lord holds us in much higher regard than all of the rich men and rulers of this current world. Consider the following verses:

"But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light:"

1 Peter 2:9, KJV

"And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

Revelation 1:5-6, KJV

"And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth."

Revelation 5:9-10, KJV

"Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years."

Revelation 20:6, KJV

While men of the world strive with each other for riches, power and honour, as dedicated Christian servants of the Lord, we already know that our rewards await us in Heaven, and it is there where we should place our sights, as we see by these verses:

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Matthew 6:19-21, KJV

"Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

2 Timothy 4:8, KJV

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and

pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city."

Hebrews 11:13-16, KJV

"And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them."

Revelation 14:13, KJV

In the final chapter of his second Epistle to the Church at Thessalonica, Paul made the following comments regarding those Christians who slacken in their work for the Lord:

"Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us. For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread. But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing."

2 Thessalonians 3:8-13, KJV

It seems that some modern-day secular Christians have taken the above verses and totally twisted their meaning. It is my understanding from the earlier verses that Paul is not talking about selfishly working at a worldly job, where we strive to meet our own needs, as well as the needs of our families. No; in my view, the work that Paul is referring to is the holy profession of being a servant of Jesus Christ. He is talking about being a soul-winner, a preacher of the Word of God. This is the true Labour of Love to which we are all called. This is the "well doing" that Paul is referring to when he says "be not weary in well doing". This idea of living the Life of Faith is further supported by Jesus' own words when He stated the following prior to sending out His Disciples on what may have been their very first missionary journey:

"Nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves: for the workman is worthy of his meat."

Matthew 10:10, KJV

"And in the same house remain, eating and drinking such things as they give: for the labourer is worthy of his hire. Go not from house to house."

Luke 10:7, KJV

"Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed."

John 6:27, KJV

The message of the previous verses is rather clear; and that is this: If we are faithful to do God's Will and Work, and not selfishly work for ourselves at some worldly job, He will

provide our every need. He promised to. In fact, according to Jesus' and Paul's own words, the Lord will use those very same people to whom we are ministering. to provide our needs. Here are two more examples from Paul's writings which prove this point:

"It hath pleased them verily; and their debtors they are. For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things."
Romans 15:27, KJV

"If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?"
1 Corinthians 9:11, KJV

Even in the Old Testament we find evidence that God will provide for us through those people to whom we minister, if we are faithful to do the job which He has given us to do. In the Book of Proverbs we find this verse:

"A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children: and the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just."
Proverbs 13:22, KJV

At this point, some people may be thinking that this means that we are to ask for money for the spiritual services that we provide to others; however, if we balance Scripture with Scripture, we can determine that this is definitely not the case. Furthermore, in the series entitled "Money-Making Bible Hucksters And Mammon", I expose the worldly trap into which many Christians fall by selling books, tapes, videos, DVD's, CD's, magazine subscriptions, and other materials. In my view, engaging in such practices is no different than any other worldly business venture. In fact, I consider it worse; because those Christians who do this are selling the Word of God -- or at least what they claim is the Word of God, or at least something that is supposedly inspired by God -- for a profit, to which I strongly object.

The truth of the matter is that those who make a business out of God's business, are just as guilty as the money changers and the people who sold sheep, oxen and doves on the steps of the Second Temple in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. Many of you will no doubt already be aware of how Jesus dealt with that outrageous situation. Considering the following:

"And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise."
John 2:15-16, KJV

Let us not forget exactly what Jesus said to His Disciples that day before He sent them out on the road on their first journey of faith. Obviously, He knew exactly by what things they would be tempted during their journey, so He warned them ahead of time with the following words:

"Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give."
Matthew 10:8, KJV

Notice that the above verse is right before the one I shared

earlier regarding taking no "scrip for your journey". The word "scrip" is derived from the Greek "pera", the primary meaning of which is "wallet". So then, what we can learn from these verses is that while God expects those people to whom we minister to, to meet our needs, just as both Jesus and Paul have stated, we are by no means supposed to force them to assist us in exchange for our ministering unto them -- as if we could really do that -- or for that matter to even directly ask them to assist us. How much less are we to try to sell them something?

One of the deceptions of modern religious organizations is to try to sell something under the guise of calling it a, ahem, "donation". This is absolute nonsense in my view. Many of us can testify to the fact that if you don't "donate" to their cause, or to their religion, or to their organization, you usually aren't given the tape, video, book, DVD, CD or whatever it is that they are trying to sell you. As Jesus clearly states in the above verse, we are to minister freely to all men. He said that we are merely to inquire who in a town is worthy, as we see here:

"And into whatsoever city or town ye shall enter, enquire who in it is worthy; and there abide till ye go thence."
Matthew 10:11, KJV

The Apostle Paul basically said the very same thing in the verses I shared earlier. The key to understanding this issue is found in the word "worthy". It is derived from the Greek word "axios" which means to merit something. In other words, what Jesus is saying is that when we enter a city or town as travelling missionaries or evangelists, we are to inquire in it who merits our presence. We are to seek out those who are hungry for the Word of God. Those people who are truly God's sheep will be more than happy to provide you with a meal, a night's lodging, or whatever your needs might happen to be; and yes, some will even freely offer a monetary gift to help see you on to your next town. Such is the Life of Faith.

I recall that when I lived the Life of Faith in Mexico many years ago, sometimes those sweet humble people would invite us into their homes for days, weeks, or even months at a time, while we ministered to them and to the people of their town or village. The Apostle Paul tells us that Lord enjoys blessing people like that because they are cheerful givers, as we see by the following verse:

"Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver."
2 Corinthians 9:7, KJV

Tragically, when I read the news today, I am both saddened and shocked to see how much violence is occurring in that nation today due to extreme corruption, drug cartels, etc. Mexico is not a safe country. In fact, it has become a very dark country in a spiritual sense, despite the fact that the Mexican people have been given so much light.

I suspect that one of these days, some people are going to be very surprised. Why? Because people who only give, donate or share because they feel obligated to do so due to peer pressure, or to save themselves a moment of embarrassment when the collection plate is being passed around in church, have very little reward in Heaven. Likewise, those people who only give of their abundance, when it really doesn't

hurt to give, also have very little reward to look forward to in Heaven. As Jesus taught us, it is those people who give of their own need -- when it is a real sacrifice for them to share -- who receive the greater Heavenly Rewards, as we see in the Lord' story concerning the widow's mite:

"And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury: and many that were rich cast in much. And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing. And he called unto him his disciples, and saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living."

Mark 12:41-44, KJV

As with the case of the Scribes and the Pharisees, some people within organized religion may outwardly appear to be pious and generous, but as the Lord told the Prophet Samuel when he went to anoint David as the new king of Israel, He looks upon the condition of one's heart:

"But the LORD said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart."

1 Samuel 16:7, KJV

So to reiterate, it is those people who truly give from their hearts, without any thought of reward, recognition or recompense, who will truly be blessed by their Father who is in Heaven. For in supporting the work of the ministry, they are doing it as unto the Lord, and not unto men. They are not menpleasers who are outwardly boasting of the good that they do, they are God pleasers who realize that God knows and sees their hearts. I am reminded of the following verses where the Apostle Paul is discussing the issue of servants, or slaves:

"Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free."

Ephesians 6:5-8, KJV

"Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God: And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ."

Colossians 3:22-24, KJV

Not only does God bless the cheerful giver, but we are told that it is impossible for us to out-give God. He will give back more to us every time, as is made plain by the following verses:

"He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me. He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a

righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward."

Matthew 10:40-42, KJV

"Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

Malachi 3:10, KJV

On the other hand, at the same time, the Lord also instructed His Disciples concerning what they should do if they did not find any worthy sheep in a particular town or village, and it is not nice. He told them:

"And when ye come into an house, salute it. And if the house be worthy, let your peace come upon it: but if it be not worthy, let your peace return to you. And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet."

Matthew 10:12-14, KJV

In a word, if you can't find anyone in a town who is willing to receive you and the words of Salvation that you bear, then that is God's sign that it is time for you to be on your way. Let God deal with them for their selfish evil hearts; and He most certainly will. While those people who rejected you may consider it a light thing, the Lord certainly does not see it that way. In rejecting you, Jesus tells us, they are rejecting Him as well; and they will have to face the consequences for such actions sooner or later. Consider the following verse:

"Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment, than for that city."

Matthew 10:15, KJV

So as we have seen, when the Lord blesses people with physical abundance, He expects them to share it with those in need; and this is particularly true regarding assisting those Christians who are doing His work.

Please go to part two for the continuation of this series.

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Where Are The First Century Churches? - Part 2

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Put Your Faith Into Action, Abraham's Example Of Faith And

Obedience, A Living Sacrifice, Jesus Was Obedient Unto Death, Jacob Bargains With God And Is Blessed, Real Faith Of Gold, Meet God's Conditions & He Will Meet Your Needs, Requirements Of Discipleship, You Must Count The Cost First, The Rewards Of Discipleship, Paul Works As A Tentmaker, Was Apostle Paul Backslidden While In Corinth?, Arguments Used By Some Secular Christians To Justify Their Selfish Materialistic Lifestyles, The Thing Which Is Good, Defining The True Christian Church, Beginning Of Roman Catholic Church, Christ Is The Head Of The Body His Church, Temple Destroyed, Christ And His Disciples Were Kicked Out Of The Temple And Synagogues, God's Original Pattern And Blueprint For The Church, Paul Persecutes Early Christians In Their Homes, First Century Churches In Homes Of Christian Believers, A New & Better Way?, Learning From Jesus

From the Scriptures that I have now presented here, it should be evident that in order for you personally to receive these blessings of provision from the Lord, you must first meet His conditions, and show your worth as a true Disciple of Jesus Christ by expressing your faith in, and your obedience to His Word. You must put your faith into action; for as the Apostle James wrote in his Epistle:

"For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."
James 2:26, KJV

In order to receive the Lord's blessings of provision in your life, you must do as Abraham did, and first be willing to give up everything, and place it upon the altar of God's service; and that includes your own life and will as well. Consider the following verses:

"By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son,"
Hebrews 11:17, KJV

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."
Romans 12:1-2, KJV

In other words, you shouldn't say, "Okay Lord, I'll do this and obey You, if You do this for me first". As I more amply explain in articles such as "Are You Crucified With Christ?" and the series "So You Really Think You Are So Humble?", we are not to present God with our demands; rather, what we are supposed to do is simply submit our will to Him in humble service, exactly as Jesus did; and as the Scriptures inform us, Jesus did it unto death, as we see here:

"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and

things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Philippians 2:5-11, KJV

Of course, this isn't necessarily a hard and fast rule. God may possibly honor that kind of arrangement, as we do find examples of it in the Old Testament. Such was the case with untrusting Jacob in the Book of Genesis. Believe it or not, the Lord actually had to prove Himself to Jacob first before Jacob would declare Him to be his God, as we see here:

"And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God:"

Genesis 28:20-21, KJV

In other words, it seems that Jacob bargained with God. But once the Lord had proven Himself to Jacob, He held Jacob to his word. As I point out in my article "The Children of God And Politics", twenty years later, Jacob had become a very rich man with two wives, two handmaidens, twelve children, servants and flocks, etc. In short, he had gone from having absolutely nothing, to being extremely wealthy; and thus it was impossible for him to deny the Lord's Hand in his life.

However, the kind of faith that really pleases the Lord is blind faith; that is, when you take a step out over the edge of that cliff without really knowing what is going to happen to you. You simply have to believe that God's Hand will be there to catch you when you fall. It is very much like when Jesus called Peter to walk out to Him on the choppy waves of the Sea of Galilee, as we see by these verses:

"And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water. And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?"

Matthew 14:28-31, KJV

If you would like to learn more about God's making of the Apostle Peter, please consider reading the article entitled "Peter: Faith Tried In The Fire".

As the Apostle Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Hebrews, it takes real faith of gold to please the Lord. We must believe that He is who He says He is, and that He will reward us for our utter trust in Him and in His Word. If people can make agreements and worldly business transactions with worldly men, then why do they have such a hard time trusting in the Word of our Heavenly Father whom we know will never cheat or betray us? As I noted at the beginning of this series, it is because most people can only trust in the temporal, physical world of the here and now. They do not have the faith to believe in what they cannot see or detect with their five senses. Paul wrote as follows:

"But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."

Hebrews 11:6, KJV

If you are willing to take that kind of a step of faith and say, "Okay Lord, I really want to serve You as a fulltime Disciple living by faith", and if you put your faith into action by leaving your job, or by leaving your family, or by doing whatever it takes to free you to do the Lord's Work, that is when the Lord can really begin to amaze you with His miracles of Divine Provision. If you meet God's conditions, He will meet your needs. I have no doubt of this.

While Jesus was still on Earth, these are the requirements that He set down for those people who desired to follow Him as fulltime Disciples. He did not make these requirements easy. In fact, my impression is that the Lord purposely made the requirements difficult so that only those men and women of the highest calibre, and of the greatest faith, would choose the rugged, uncertain road of Discipleship. Some of the rigid requirements which Jesus established can be found in the following verses:

"And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me."

Matthew 10:36-38, KJV

"And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it."

Luke 9:23-24, KJV

"If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple."

Luke 14:26-27, KJV

"So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple."

Luke 14:33, KJV

As you can see, Jesus set the standard very high. As I point out in articles such as "The Parable Of The Sower: Salvation And Service", not everyone was able to make the grade in Jesus' day. Some people -- such as the rich young ruler -- thought that they had sufficient faith; but in the case of the young ruler, in the end, through Jesus' careful leading, that young man discovered that it was all a proud pretense on his part. It is for this reason that the Lord also admonishes us to count the cost before we make such a major decision in our lives. Consider what the Lord said in the Gospel of Luke:

"For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish. Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassador, and desireth

conditions of peace."

Luke 14:28-32, KJV

For those people who are willing to take the leap of faith, and embark on a life of Christian Discipleship, the Lord promises to not only provide their every need, but even in excess of their needs, as can be seen by the following verses:

"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

Matthew 6:33, KJV

"And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life."

Matthew 19:29, KJV

"And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life."

Mark 10:29-30, KJV

"If then God so clothe the grass, which is to day in the field, and to morrow is cast into the oven; how much more will he clothe you, O ye of little faith? And seek not ye what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind. For all these things do the nations of the world seek after: and your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things. But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you."

Luke 12:28-31, KJV

The Apostle Paul reaffirmed Jesus' teachings when he wrote the following in his Epistle to the Church at Philippi:

"But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus."

Philippians 4:19, KJV

Notice that Paul states that God will provide our needs, and not that we will provide our own needs. It seems that some Christians within organized religion perpetuate the myth that Paul continued working as a tentmaker after he began his Life of Faith. However, as all of the Scriptures in this series have demonstrated, this is not the case whatsoever. The Lord made it very clear that we must be willing to forsake the old life; and that most certainly includes our old secular jobs.

A close reading of Acts chapter eighteen reveals that Paul may have been in a somewhat backslidden state while he was living with Aquila and Priscilla. You will notice in the following verses that we are told that Paul "was pressed in the spirit" once Silas and Timotheus arrived from Macedonia. In other words, my impression is that he was convicted in his heart, and that he once again became more active for the Lord, due to the presence of Silas and Timotheus:

"After these things Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth; And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in

Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them. And because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers. And he reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks. And when Silas and Timotheus were come from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ."

Acts 18:1-5, KJV

Furthermore, it seems rather contradictory to me that Paul would say that God will provide all of our needs, and then turn around and spend so much time making tents instead of preaching the Gospel and living the Life of Faith; which is specifically what the Lord had called him to do. In my view, it does not seem reasonable or fair that the Lord would lay down all of the above rules for Discipleship, and then not expect Paul to adhere to them.

Some people might argue, "But didn't Paul just preach in the synagogue on the Sabbath? Doesn't that mean that he worked the rest of the week at his secular job as a tentmaker?" The answer to this question is so simple that it is almost silly. The reason why Paul only went to the synagogue every Sabbath, is because that is the only day that the Jewish people would gather there. Being as they were of the world, yes, they did work the other six days of the week. However, in light of the Scriptural evidence I have already presented in this series, I do not believe that this is what Paul or any of the other Disciples were doing on an extended basis.

To clarify, my impression is this: Being as they were of the same profession -- that is, tentmakers -- when Paul arrived in Corinth, he stayed with Aquila and Priscilla, who had just recently arrived from Rome. We are told that Paul "wrought" with them. This word "wrought" is derived from the Greek word "ergazomai", which according to Thayer's Greek English Lexicon means to work, labour, to trade, to make gains by trading, or to do business. In other words, yes, when he first arrived in Corinth, it appears that he was indeed working as a tentmaker along side of Aquila and Priscilla. We are also told that Paul would "reason" -- that is, hold discourses -- in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

In other words, just like so many secular Christians today, it seems that, for a time at least, Paul was basically being a "weekend Christian". Despite the fact that Jesus Christ had died for his sins, knocked him off of his horse on the road to Damascus, blinded him for three days, and then extended Mercy to him through the act of healing his blindness by the hands of the Disciple Ananias, my impression is that once Paul arrived in Corinth -- which was a very carnal town, by the way -- he decided to settle down into the safe life of just being a "weekend Christian".

But then what happened next?

Once Silas and Timotheus arrived from Macedonia, we are told that Paul was "pressed in the Spirit". Exactly what does this phrase mean? Turning again to Thayer's Greek English Lexicon, we learn that the word "pressed" is translated from the Greek word "sunecho". This word is sometimes used in a metaphorical sense to mean to constrain, oppress, of ills laying hold of one and distressing him, to be held with, afflicted with, suffering from, to urge, or to impel. Personally, as I noted

earlier, I understand this to mean that Paul was cut to the heart by the presence of Silas and Timotheus, because he knew that he was being slothful in the Lord's Business. In other words, Paul was convicted by the Spirit to get busy again for the Lord, and not just on the weekends.

Another favorite verse which is sometimes used by Christians who attempt to justify their selfish living one hundred and sixty-seven hours a week -- they give God one hour a week -- while still claiming to be Disciples of Jesus Christ, is the following, which was also written by Paul, and addressed to the brethren at Corinth no less:

"And labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it:"
1 Corinthians 4:12, KJV

Certain Christians will look at that verse and claim, "You see! Paul continued to hold a secular job as a tentmaker in order to earn his living, even after he dedicated himself to the Lord! It clearly says he worked with his hands!" As I point out many times in my articles, to truly understand the Bible requires that we diligently compare one Scripture with another. Earlier, I quoted Jesus' own words where He said to labour not for the meat which perishes. Are we to assume then that Paul is contradicting Jesus' words? I think not. Thus, it is my view that Paul is actually talking about laboring in the ministry of the Lord, to provide the spiritual needs of the flock. In further support of my argument, let us take a look at the verse which precedes the one above. In it Paul states:

"Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwellingplace;"
1 Corinthians 4:11, KJV

Now, if Paul was earning his keep by working as a tentmaker, how could he possibly be hungry, thirsty, naked, or not have any certain dwelling place? It doesn't seem to make any sense whatsoever, does it? If Paul was making and selling tents on the weekdays, surely he would at least have had sufficient food to eat and something to drink, not to mention clothes to wear. Let's not forget that in those days, a lot of people still lived in tents; so I would imagine that tentmaking must have been a rather lucrative business. Yet look again at what Paul wrote. Everything that Paul says portrays a picture of one who is not engaged in the tentmaking business; unless we choose to believe that Paul was just one lousy tentmaker. If Paul actually did this six days a week, as some Christians claim, then he was clearly in the wrong business; because no one in their right mind is going to remain in a business where they can't even feed and clothe themselves.

Let us also not forget that Paul was a well-educated Pharisee who had sat at the feet of Gamaliel, and a citizen of Rome as well. Given his background, his education, and his status as a citizen of Rome, it is difficult to understand how he could suffer so much want, unless he had purposely chosen to leave behind all of those things which pertained to his former privileged life, including his lucrative job as a tentmaker.

I can only conclude then that if we put all of these verses in their proper context, and accept all of the requirements which were set down by Jesus Christ Himself, which included forsaking all and leaving everything behind, then "working

with our own hands" must have absolutely nothing to do with holding a secular job, despite the claims of certain secular Christians who wish to justify their selfish lifestyle. When Jesus called His First Disciples, we are told that there was no hesitation on their part, and that they immediately left their former lives behind, just as Paul would do sometime later. Surely Paul followed his own advice when he said that we become new creatures in Christ Jesus; and that old things are passed away.

In addition, Jesus made it very clear that we simply cannot serve two masters. In saying this, the Lord contrasted God with mammon. Exactly what is mammon? Derived from the Greek word "mammonas", it refers to treasure, riches or personal wealth, plain and simple. Following are some additional verses which support these various points:

"And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. And they straightway left their nets, and followed him."

Matthew 4:19-20, KJV

"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

2 Corinthians 5:17, KJV

"No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

Matthew 6:24, KJV

There is yet another verse -- which was likewise written by the Apostle Paul -- which is sometimes used by Christians who compromise their faith, and who insist that they can serve the Lord as so-called modern-age Disciples, while at the same time continuing to serve the worldly system of man. This verse is the following:

"Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth."

Ephesians 4:28, KJV

In my view, everything that I have stated previously can be applied to this verse as well. When Paul says ". . . labour, working with his hands the thing which is good", I believe that he is talking about preaching the Good News; that is, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What better thing could there possibly be than that? That entire phrase, "the thing which is good", is derived from one Greek word -- "agathos" -- and it is an exact translation. If there is one good thing which everyone in the world needs, surely it is the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that they might obtain Eternal Salvation.

In light of the preponderance of Scriptural evidence I have provided, this clearly seems to be the best interpretation of these verses to me. However, let me also add that this does not mean that the First Disciples did not use some of their God-given talents for the benefit of the Church.

This leads us into our next topic of discussion. When the Apostles and Early Disciples weren't engaged in preaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath, exactly what were they doing? From reading the four Gospels, the Book of Acts, and the

Epistles, it becomes clear that they were either travelling, resting, or else they were preaching in other places. As I explain in other articles such as "Revelation's Babylon The Great Whore", the true Church is not a physical organization which oversees thousands of church buildings that are spread out all over the world, such as the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy. According to the Scriptures, in reality, the true Church is the universal Body of Believers in Jesus Christ. Jesus clarified the universal spiritual nature of His Church when He spoke the following words to the Samaritan woman at the well:

"Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."
John 4:21-24, KJV

Our English word "church" is derived from the Greek word "ekklesia", which refers to an assembly of people. In fact, it refers to a public assembly of people. This word is in no way connected to a physical building. As you may know, while the Jews obviously had their Temple in Jerusalem, as well as their local synagogues, the Early Christians most certainly did not have church buildings during the First Century. Not only that, but they didn't even want them, and couldn't have had them, even if they did desire them. As I amply explain in several other articles, it was the Roman Catholic Church which started the whole business of building churches several hundred years later, when they began to establish a physical empire of power and wealth -- and with the encouragement and support of Rome, no less -- because they could not wait for the real Kingdom of God to arrive. As the Apostle Paul wrote, we Christians are the Body of Christ, and Jesus is our Head; and He is the only Head that we need. Consider these verses:

"For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body."
Ephesians 5:23, KJV

"And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence."
Colossians 1:18, KJV

As I mentioned a moment ago -- and discuss in more detail in other articles -- during the First Century, the only major religious building that was erected in Israel was the Temple in Jerusalem; and God clearly showed His displeasure with it, by destroying it twice; first around 587 BC, and then a second time in 70 AD. While the Jews did have their village synagogues, due to their radical doctrine, it wasn't before long that the Lord and His Disciples were no longer able to preach inside of them. In fact, you may recall that Jesus was kicked out of the very synagogue in Nazareth where He had spent His boyhood, as we see by these verses:

"And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read . . . And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, And rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led

him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built,
that they might cast him down headlong. But he passing
through the midst of them went his way,"

Luke 4:16, 28-30, KJV

In light of this fact, the questions which must now be asked
-- and answered -- are the following: Exactly where is God's
Church located? Where did the Early Disciples meet? Where did
they preach besides in the Temple and in the synagogue on the
weekends, when it was still permissible for them to do so? To
discover the answers to these important questions, we must go
directly to the Scriptures in order to determine what they
reveal to us. When Saul persecuted the Early Church, did he
go and drag Christians out of their Sunday church services?
He most certainly did not! The Bible quite plainly informs us
that Paul went directly to where the true Church was located,
as we see here:

"As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into
every house, and haling men and women committed them to
prison."

Acts 8:3, KJV

Where did Saul go to make havoc of the Church? We are told
that he entered "into every house", because that is where the
true Church was located in those days. Now, if that does not
convince you, perhaps these following verses will. They will
clearly show you that Christians who build church buildings,
and who attend them on weekends, are actually disobeying the
Lord, and are not really following the Blueprint or the
Original Pattern which was established by the Lord and His
Early Apostles in the Book of Acts:

"Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Salute my
wellbeloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia unto
Christ."

Romans 16:5, KJV

"The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla
salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in
their house."

1 Corinthians 16:19, KJV

"Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and
the church which is in his house."

Colossians 4:15, KJV

"And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier,
and to the church in thy house:"

Philemon 1:2, KJV

Thus we see four more very clear examples which demonstrate
exactly where the true Church was -- and is -- located; that
is, in the homes of the Believers. As you will discover in a
moment, it was not always just one little family living by
themselves either. Undoubtedly, some people who resist this
Biblical truth are going to try to justify their actions by
saying something like the following: "Yes, but that was in
those days! The situation has changed a lot since then. We
know how to do it better today. We have simply improved on
the original methods of Christ and His Apostles. Now that
Christianity has become accepted in the eyes of the world,
we build church buildings where it is easy for people to
come together to fellowship and worship the Lord."

If this happens to be your attitude, I will simply have to

disagree with you, because the Bible teaches me something very different. Furthermore, what gives any of you the right to change what God obviously ordained? The Original Apostles and Disciples lived in the very same century as Jesus Christ. They sat at the Lord's very feet and learned directly from Him. They received the Original Plan and the Original Vision from the Master. How can anyone possibly suggest that these men didn't know how to do it right? They were the very first people to receive the Gift of the Holy Spirit which -- among other things -- helped them to remember everything they had been taught by the Lord. In the Gospel of John we are told the following:

"But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you."

John 14:26, KJV

Please go to part three for the continuation of this series.

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End Of File

Where Are The First Century Churches? - Part 3

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That Was Then And This Is Now, We Must Have Our Megachurches, Early Disciples Won New Converts By The Thousands In One Day, Stadium Crusades And Christians Who Persevere, Apostles Cast Into Prison And Warned To Stop Preaching In The Name Of Jesus, First Century Christian Home Fellowships, From House To House, Singleness Of Heart And Unity Of The Spirit, Simplicity Of The Gospel Of Christ, Burden Of The Law, Paul's Warnings Regarding Jewish False Brethren And False Doctrines That Perverted The Gospel Of Christ, The Home Is The Center Of The True Church, Modern Methods Of Evangelization, Blueprint Hasn't Changed, Modern Christianity Is A Religion Of Convenience, Dangers Of Worldliness, Persecution: Price Of Dropping Out And Following Jesus, Laws Against Communal Living, Organized Religion Fears Small Christian Fellowships, Who Is Actually The Real Cult?, Sickening Personality Cult Worship, Apostle Paul's Rebukes, Paul Heals A Crippled Man In Lystra, Strange Manifestations

Another excuse which is often used by modern Christians to try to justify the millions -- if not billions -- of dollars that are invested annually in constructing lavish church buildings goes something like this: "We understand that the Disciples of the First Century met in small fellowships in the privacy of their homes, or perhaps out in a field, but that was then, and this is now. You need to understand that we are much bigger today. We couldn't possibly meet in our

homes, or even in some public place. We must have our church buildings. We must have our megachurches".

Quite frankly, this is not a valid excuse for not following the Original Plan that is laid down in the Book of Acts, as well as in the Gospels and the Epistles. Let us not forget that the Apostles and Early Disciples were winning thousands of new converts at a time. On two occasions alone they won at least eight thousand new members, and that only included the men. In contrast, I am not aware of one single modern church that's actually winning new members thousands at a time; are you? Hundreds or thousands of people may accept Jesus Christ at huge stadium crusades, but how many of them actually go on to become full-time members of a church, and begin to lead active Christian lives? How many of them actually persevere in their new-found Faith once the event has ended?

To the contrary, polls and statistics indicate that church attendance has actually been in decline for many years; in fact, for decades. Consider the following verses, and notice that these new converts were not only baptized in a single day, but they were also "added unto them". I understand this phrase to mean that these new converts actually joined the fledgling Christian Church, and became active participants in it, by following the doctrines and practices of the Apostles. Again, they were not won over a period of time; they were won in a single day:

"Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls."

Acts 2:41, KJV

"Howbeit many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand."

Acts 4:4, KJV

A close examination of the Book of Acts reveals that after those two mighty witnessing events had occurred, no one said "Hey guys, we are getting too big to be doing this outside. Let's start a building fund so that we can build ourselves some big fancy church buildings. Let's give those Pharisees at the Temple some stiff competition." Now, I realize that I am being a bit dramatic here, but it is to make a point. As I mentioned earlier, it is common knowledge that the Apostles couldn't have constructed church buildings even if they had wanted to, because the Jewish religious Elders were after their blood, as were the Romans as well. Contrary to such an outrageous proposal as constructing church buildings, the following verses explain exactly what the Apostles had their new converts do:

"And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,"

Acts 2:46, KJV

"And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house,"

Acts 20:20, KJV

While the Apostles and Disciples may have initially gotten together for fellowship in the Temple, we know that it did not last for long; particularly not after the Jewish Elders had them thrown into prison, and then warned them to desist

from preaching in the name of Jesus in Acts chapter five, as we see by the following verses:

"Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation, And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison . . . Then came one and told them, saying, Behold, the men whom ye put in prison are standing in the temple, and teaching the people. Then went the captain with the officers, and brought them without violence: for they feared the people, lest they should have been stoned. And when they had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them, Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us. Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men."

Acts 5:17-18, 25-29, KJV

After the Disciples were kicked out of the Temple because of their radical doctrine of Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone, they didn't just abandon their new-found Faith. Neither did they go out and build a new temple that would be able to accommodate even more people, and rival the Temple which already stood on Mount Moriah. After all, as Peter said to the lame man in Acts chapter three "Silver and gold have I none". The above verses plainly inform us that the Christians of the First Century met both publicly, as well as privately, in the homes of fellow Believers. In other words, the obvious blueprint of the First Century Church was home fellowships.

I find it rather interesting that the Apostle Paul went from actually persecuting the Early Christians from house to house, to actually ministering to them from house to house. Compare the following two verses. This fact becomes more evident when we view these verses side-by-side:

"As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison."

Acts 8:3, KJV

"And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house,"

Acts 20:20, KJV

So according to all of the previous verses, Paul persecuted from house to house, he preached house to house after he came to Jesus Christ -- or rather said, he was forcefully brought to Christ on the road to Damascus -- and the Disciples of the First Century Disciples broke bread from house to house. Can the message and the First Century blueprint be any clearer than that?

This is precisely what we saw in earlier verses as well. Even though Christian Believers of the First Century lived much as we do today -- that is, in separate dwellings -- we are told that there was "singleness of heart". This word "singleness" is derived from the Greek word "aphelotes", which also means simplicity. In other words, the First Century Disciples were in unity with the Apostles, and obviously adhered to the same doctrines. There was sweet Christian fellowship and unity of the Spirit. This is precisely what the Apostle Paul exhorted the Corinthian brethren to strive for in the following verse:

"Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

1 Corinthians 1:10, KJV

In another sense, the phrase "singleness of heart" can also be interpreted as meaning that the Disciples shared a simple sincere faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, in contrast to the Scribes and the Pharisees who had a very complicated religious system that was marked by all kinds of laws and oral traditions, the fledgling Christian faith was -- and continues to be -- based upon one basic, simple truth; and that Truth is that Salvation can be obtained through faith in the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ alone. There are no other requirements that must be met, other than repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Church doctrines and traditions will not save us. Only being washed in the Blood of Jesus Christ can do that.

As I point out in other articles, it is this central Truth which the unbelieving Jews unsuccessfully tried to destroy. In order to accomplish this, they sent in spies and false brethren -- that is, Jews who still believed that one must adhere to the Mosaic Law to the letter -- who then tried to create doctrinal division between the First Disciples. In other words, similar to certain Christians today who insist that water baptism, or keeping the Sabbath, or belonging to one particular church or group are necessary in order to be truly saved, those crafty Jewish leaders schemed to destroy the simplicity of the Gospel of Christ by adding burdensome conditions to Salvation, such as their insistence that one must be circumcised. In the Gospels, even Jesus exposed this particular sin of the Jewish religious leaders when He said:

". . . The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers."

Matthew 23:2-4, KJV

Years later, those Law-bound Jews were still trying to impose the Law, and their vain traditions, upon the Disciples. Paul fully understood this, which is why we find warnings such as the following throughout his writings:

"For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God."

Romans 2:28-29, KJV

"Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ."

Colossians 2:6-8, KJV

"And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God."

1 Corinthians 2:4-5, KJV

So as you can see, as a former Pharisee and a persecutor of the Church, the Apostle Paul was more than aware of their craftiness. In fact, just prior to beginning his final trip to Jerusalem, Paul issued the following warning concerning the legalistic Jews in the Book of Acts:

"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."
Acts 20:28-30, KJV

Paul's concern for the young fledgling Christian Church, and how it might be destroyed from within by his former Jewish brethren -- the Pharisees -- is quite evident in a number of his other Epistles as well. Consider the following verses where Paul repeatedly warns the Christian brethren to beware of Jewish false brethren:

"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them."
Romans 16:17, KJV

"But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him . . . For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works."
2 Corinthians 11:3-4, 13-15, KJV

"I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed."
Galatians 1:6-9, KJV

"And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you."
Galatians 2:4-5, KJV

"Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision."
Philippians 3:2, KJV

"If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the

doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself."

1 Timothy 6:3-5, KJV

"But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain. A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself." Titus 3:9-11, KJV

Again, Paul's words are primarily directed at the Jewish religious hierarchy, who not only rejected Christ, but who were also directly responsible for His Death upon a Roman cross. They -- and their lackeys -- were a constant threat to the First Century Christian Church.

In the previous verses from Paul's second Epistle to the Corinthians, the word "simplicity" is derived from the Greek word "haplotes". This word signifies singleness, simplicity, sincerity, or mental honesty. Please notice that it is very similar to the Greek word "aphelotes" which is translated as "singleness" in the previous verse that we examined from the Book of Acts, where we read that they "did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart".

With the Scriptural evidence which we have examined thus far, it should be evident to you that the True Church is actually centered in the home; because the Church does not consist of a physical building, but rather of the Believers themselves. This is an issue which we will discuss in more detail later on in this series. Despite the fact that the First Century Apostles were winning literally thousands of new converts to the Christian faith, they still continued to meet in their homes -- obviously in small groups -- where they shared not only the Bread of Life -- that is, the Word of God -- but they also shared their food and other necessities as well.

As you may have already concluded from the previous verses, once they converted to the new Faith, these early Christians opened their homes for other Disciples to come and live with them, provided, of course, that they had room. In short, some of the larger residences which were not sold, probably became Christian communes of various sizes. I will be exploring this concept further on in this series. The main question that I wish for you to consider at this time is this: In light of the Scriptural truth which I have now presented here, verse by verse, why is it that some people today continue to build and attend their big fancy church buildings? Has God changed the way He wants us to do things today? I seriously doubt it; for as the Apostle Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Hebrews:

"Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever." Hebrews 13:8, KJV

While our methods of preaching the Gospel have improved as more modern means of evangelization have become available to us, such as radio, television, Gospel tracts, the Internet, etc., the basic Gospel message has not changed. Furthermore, it is my belief that the Original Blueprint regarding how we are to live the Gospel has not changed either. More to the point, if we apply the previous Scriptures to our situation

today, how can anyone claim to be seeking first the Kingdom of God -- as Jesus commanded us to do -- when they dedicate most of the week to working to meet their own needs, and to satisfying their own personal pleasures? How many of us have taken up the challenge to follow the pattern of the Book of Acts, by living and sharing together like the Christians of the First Century Church?

Quite frankly, this is one of the big deceptions that is so often promoted by modern Christianity. In my view, for many Christians today -- although not all -- organized religion -- or "organized division" as I prefer to call it -- is in reality a religion of convenience. In other words, the creed of quite a few modern Christians seems to be "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, after you have sought out your own needs and pleasures first". It is a religion of compromise; it is a religion of selfish materialism; and it conflicts directly with the Apostle John's warning regarding the danger of worldliness, which we find in his first Epistle, as we see here:

"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world."
1 John 2:15-16, KJV

The Apostles James and Paul likewise had this to say on the very same subject, and admonished us to not become entangled with the affairs of this world, or to be blinded by its many enticements, but to keep our sight set on the Kingdom of God:

"While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal."
2 Corinthians 4:18, KJV

"If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth."
Colossians 3:1-2, KJV

"But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness."
1 Timothy 6:6-11, KJV

"No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier."
2 Timothy 2:4, KJV

"Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God."

James 4:4, KJV

You may recall that in part two, I shared the following verses with you from the Gospel of Mark:

"And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life."

Mark 10:29-30, KJV

Please notice that the Lord attached one other item to the list of things which we will inherit, if we take the step of faith, and choose to follow Him one hundred percent every day of our lives as true Disciples. I am not referring to Eternal Life, but rather to His phrase "with persecutions". In other words, if you're so bold as to drop out of the worldly system of man-made slavery, you will be rewarded both in this life, as well as in the next; but you need to be prepared to suffer some degree of persecution, due to your willingness to make such a bold choice.

The truth of the matter is that the rulers of this world both hate and despise anyone -- whether they are Christian or not -- who can demonstrate that it's actually possible to survive outside of their oppressive economic system. These dropouts prove that there is another way; a better way; a way that the powers-that-be simply do not want people to learn about, and much less actually try to live. If you doubt that this is so, then stop to consider how many laws have now been enacted which basically make it illegal for people to live together in a communal lifestyle. There are zoning laws, housing laws, health department rules, etc., which discourage this type of living, all under the guise of the cloak of public safety and legality.

As if this were not enough, by way of the mass media, Satan has made sure that alarming terms such as free love, wild sex, prostitution rings, dangerous cult, arms traffickers, drug traffickers, etc., have become associated with these kinds of communities. Sadly, it seems that this suppression and persecution isn't just limited to government authorities alone. I suspect that some members of organized religion may also have a hand in instigating persecution against certain small Christian fellowships as well, because they view such fellowships as competition, and they fear that they might lose their members to them. Isn't this precisely what we see occurring in both the Gospels and the Book of Acts? As we saw earlier, these books reveal that the established religion of the day -- Judaism -- persecuted the fledgling Christian Church, beginning with the persecution of Jesus Himself.

As I recently questioned on the Endtime Prophecy Net Blog, why is it, that if a small group of dedicated Christians get together in the privacy of a fellow Christian's home in order to engage in Christian fellowship, perhaps participate in a Bible study, and share a potluck dinner, they are viewed with suspicion, perhaps suspected of being a danger to society, and maybe even accused of being a strange cult; yet if those very same people attend a church service where there is also Christian fellowship, a Bible study before mass, and perhaps an after-service potluck or snacks as well, they are viewed as respectable members of society? What is the difference?

Let's be honest here. The way that some church members are so mesmerized by, and blindly follow the teachings and doctrines of their pastors, priests, ministers, bishops, archbishops -- and yes, even the Pope in Rome -- one would almost think that they are cult leaders as well. There is so much man worship and personality worship occurring within organized religion, that it is quite sickening. Isn't that exactly what cults do? Don't they blindly follow a man or woman who claims to be the very voice of God? Don't they convince their followers that they have received special revelations from the Lord? It may surprise you to learn that many modern denominations began in this very same manner, yet now they are respected members of organized religion. Infatuation with any man or woman of God can be a dangerous thing. Whether there are ten followers, or millions of followers, it may still be a cult. We need to keep our eyes on Jesus alone.

The Scriptures reveal that even the Apostle Paul had to deal with the human propensity for man worship. Thus, we find him writing the following in his Epistle to the Corinthians:

"For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?"

1 Corinthians 1:11-13, KJV

"For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase."

1 Corinthians 3:3-7, KJV

With good reason Paul wrote the previous verses. He was no stranger to this human need for man worship. You may recall that in the Book of Acts, while he and Barnabas were in the town of Lystra, Lycaonia in Asia Minor -- which is today a part of modern Turkey -- Paul healed a man who suffered from crippled feet. Exactly how did the people of Lystra react upon witnessing this miracle of God? Consider the following:

"And there sat a certain man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from his mother's womb, who never had walked: The same heard Paul speak: who stedfastly beholding him, and perceiving that he had faith to be healed, Said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped and walked. And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men. And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercurius, because he was the chief speaker. Then the priest of Jupiter, which was before their city, brought oxen and garlands unto the gates, and would have done sacrifice with the people. Which when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of, they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out, And saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made

heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein: Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness. And with these sayings scarce restrained they the people, that they had not done sacrifice unto them."
Acts 14:8-18, KJV

Sadly, as I explain in other articles such as "God's Golden Teeth, Or Satan's Delusion?" and "Have You Been Slain In The Spirit?", it seems that there are many Christians today who are not happy with their faith unless they can witness the miracles, and behold the strange manifestations; and Satan is more than happy to meet their expectations. How many of these so-called "men of God" have been placed on a pedestal by their followers when these unusual events allegedly occur?

Please go to part four for the continuation of this series.

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End Of File

Where Are The First Century Churches? - Part 4

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Logan's Run Movie: An Artificial Society Ruled By Deception, We Must Choose Between Continuing To Live The Lie Or Else Follow The Truth And Be Free, The Jewish System Of Bondage, Jesus Was A Threat To Status Quo, An Alternative To Corrupt System Of Man, Persecuted For Our Faith By The Children Of Disobedience Who Follow The False God Of This World - Satan, Come Out From Among Them And Be Separate, Holy Saints Of God, Ekklesia Of God, Modern Spiritual Babylon The Great, Free To Free Others, Seek First The Kingdom Of God, Communal Living, Living The Life Of Faith, Backslidden Condition Of Ancient Israelites, First Century Church Financial Plan, Communism In The New Testament, The Selfish Nature Of Modern Christianity, Both Rich And Poor Chose To Forsake All And Join The First Century Church, Example Of Moses, Lying Ananias And Sapphira, God Has Not Changed, Dwindling Fire Of Faith, The Failures Of The Roman Catholic Church, Compromise In Our Personal Lives, Free Will And Personal Choice, Reasons For Our Failure: Lack Of Faith, Lack Of Love And Fear Of Persecution, Living Faith Or Dead Faith, Consumed By Affairs Of This Life, Importance Of Abiding In God's Word, Faith Comes Through The Word Of God

As I noted in part three, the rulers of this present world do not like it when someone demonstrates that it is possible to survive and live outside of their oppressive economic system. In thinking about how the ungodly system of man endeavors to keep all of us firmly clenched in its grips, I was reminded

of a movie which I saw more than three decades ago entitled "Logan's Run". If you have not watched this movie yet, but intend to do so, then you may not want to read the next few paragraphs, as I do reveal a major part of the plot.

"Logan's Run" revolved around a futuristic society which was totally self-contained within a domed city. I believe that this city came about as the result of a nuclear war or some other catastrophe. Because of limited resources within the city, population growth control became necessary. Thus, the Controllers of the city passed a law, and through very strong deception, created a quasi-religious ritual whereby everyone who had reached the age of thirty had to undergo a process to rejuvenate themselves. This rebirth ceremony was referred to as Carousel. To create the startling effects in the movie, the producers used a ballet troupe suspended by wires, and a series of variously-colored laser beams. I was quite impressed at the time.

The gist of the movie was that the protagonist eventually uncovered the great deception; that is, that the so-called Carousel rebirth ceremony wasn't really rejuvenating anyone; rather, they were actually being destroyed. In this way, the city's population was maintained within the required limits. Upon discovering this horrible truth, he immediately began his quest to escape from the city.

The way that this movie relates to our current discussion is that when the group of rebels finally gained their freedom, contrary to their expectations, they discovered the natural world outside of the domed city had been totally rejuvenated. In other words, they realized that they had needlessly been living in a totally artificial environment for years, due to the deception which had been perpetrated by the Controllers. Once the rebels discovered this truth, they were confronted with a choice: either they could continue living the lie, or else they could follow the truth and be free. This is what Jesus told the Jews who had believed on Him as well. In the Gospel of John, the Lord says the following:

". . . If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free . . . If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

John 8:31b-32, 36, KJV

Please notice that in order to be the Lord's Disciples, to know the Truth, and to be truly free, we must first continue in His Word. We must believe in it, and live it, to the best of our ability. However, similar to the evil Controllers in "Logan's Run", the manipulative Jewish hierarchy of Jesus' time did not want the First Century Christians to be freed from their system of bondage under the Mosaic Law and Oral Tradition. Everything that Jesus and His followers said and did was a threat to the status quo which the Jewish leaders had cultivated with the government of Rome. As I explain in other articles, that is why those evil Jews sought to kill Jesus, and then continued to persecute His followers in the Book of Acts. Is it possible that there are forces in the world today which likewise wish to keep us in bondage to a similar corrupt system, whether it is secular or religious?

Sadly, the answer seems to be "yes", and we currently find ourselves in a very similar situation today. There is in fact another reality which exists outside of the artificial world of money and materialism. However, in order to survive in it,

we must be willing to forsake our faith in money, and place it in the one true God. Likewise, as I have already pointed out, we must be willing to suffer persecution, both verbal and physical, for choosing to take a stand against the false system of man which has enslaved us for so many years. In particular, it is when we begin to tell others that such an alternative exists, that we will begin to feel the wrath of the Controllers of this world, who themselves are influenced by the false god of this world; Satan himself. Consider the following verses which were written two thousand years ago by the original Christian rebels who escaped from the corrupt system of man:

"Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake."

Matthew 5:11, KJV

"But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come."

Matthew 10:23, KJV

"But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake."

Luke 21:12, KJV

"Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also."

John 15:20, KJV

"Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."

2 Timothy 3:12, KJV

"Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience:"

Ephesians 2:2, KJV

"In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them."

2 Corinthians 4:4, KJV

Clearly then, being a full-time Disciple of Jesus Christ does have its price. We will be persecuted in one form or another by the children of disobedience; that is, the blind rulers of this world who follow in the steps of their false god, Satan. However, the rewards far exceed the persecutions which we may suffer in this life. When Paul was discussing the sins of the Corinthian brethren, he wrote something which could easily apply to many Christians today, who are still trapped within the false system of worldwide Babylon the Great. Paul wrote:

"Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you,"

2 Corinthians 6:17, KJV

Please notice the Lord's specific promise in that verse. If we obey His command to come out from among them, that is, if

we separate ourselves from the filth and spiritual pollution of the world, He will receive us. He will care for us. He will provide for us. He will protect us. He will prosper us. This idea of being separated, or sanctified, from the world is exactly what being a Saint of God is all about. The word "saint" is derived from the Greek word "hagios" which means a holy thing, or a holy one. The word "holy" is also derived from the Greek word "hagiazō" which means to be separated, purified and dedicated to God.

Thus, the "ekklesia" -- that is, the true assembly of God -- is comprised of His Saints; that is, those people who have been called out from the world and the corrupt system of man, in order to serve the one true God. As we saw in part two of this series, being separated from the world is a requirement which Jesus placed upon His first Disciples, and it is still a requirement today for those who wish to call themselves by His Name. Consider the following verses which further reveal God's plan for His children to be separated from the false plastic world of modern physical and spiritual Babylon the Great:

"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful."

Psalms 1:1, KJV

"Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the LORD."

Isaiah 52:11, KJV

"Flee out of the midst of Babylon, and deliver every man his soul: be not cut off in her iniquity; for this is the time of the LORD'S vengeance; he will render unto her a recompence."

Jeremiah 51:6, KJV

"If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you."

John 15:19, KJV

"I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word . . . I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth."

John 17:6, 14-17, KJV

"And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation."

Acts 2:40, KJV

"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God."

1 Corinthians 2:12, KJV

"Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate."

Hebrews 13:12, KJV

"For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire."

2 Peter 2:20-22, KJV

"And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues."

Revelation 18:4, KJV

What we are basically being told by the previous verses, is that in order to free others from the clutches of Satan and his evil, filthy world of corruption and confusion -- that is, spiritual Babylon the Great -- we must first be free ourselves. In other words, while we are indeed in the world because we live on this Earth and are a part of society, we are not truly a part of it in a spiritual sense. Therefore, we should not take pleasure in the same things as the people of the world. Neither should we think or behave like them. Instead, as I explain in such articles as "Seek Ye First The Kingdom Of God", we should put the Lord, His Word and His Kingdom first in our lives, and do what we can in order to bring others into His Holy Kingdom.

At this point, perhaps you might be wondering to yourself, "Well, suppose that I really do want to live in this manner. Suppose I want to really try to completely obey the Lord and lead a Life of Faith. Exactly how would I go about doing it? Where do I start?"

As I have already shown, within the Book of Acts we find the blueprint for the Early Church which was founded by Jesus and His Apostles. We have plainly seen through many verses that the True Church of Christ consists of the Body of Believers who have physically and spiritually separated themselves from the world by forsaking their secular jobs, family members who oppose their Christian beliefs, and any other obligation that may keep them from serving the Lord full-time. To reiterate, the First Century Disciples weren't just "weekend Christians". They did not just serve the Lord in their spare time. We have seen that the First Century Church met and lived in their own homes, and that they in fact live communally when and where possible. One clear example of this can be found in the very first chapter of the Book of Acts, as we see here:

"Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day's journey. And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon Zelotes, and Judas the brother of James. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren. And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty,)"

Acts 1:12-15, KJV

The previous verses are a clear example of First Century Christian communal living. These verses appear to be saying that at the very least, the eleven remaining Apostles lived together, as well as Jesus' flesh family -- which included Mary and His siblings -- plus the other women who followed Jesus. These verses may even be saying that all one hundred and twenty of them were living together; although I think that such a large number of people living together would no doubt have been viewed as a threat by both the Romans and the Jewish hierarchy, and thus would not be permitted. It would have also required a very large home to accommodate so many people. Of course, if these people had been forced to live together in hiding due to persecution, then the size of the upper room may have been a secondary issue.

Regardless of the specific number of people, it seems clear to me that they were living together communally. This leads us to another question: If all of these people dropped out of the secular system of their day and forsook their former lives and jobs, how did they manage to survive? Earlier in this series we learned that the Disciples went out on "faith trips", and that they relied upon the goodness of the people to whom they ministered to provide their needs. This is what living the Life of Faith is all about. Living such a life is not easy. It requires that we have total faith and trust in God's ability to provide our needs. It requires dependence upon God. This kind of faith is only born when we know that we are pleasing Him, and fulfilling His Will for our lives. I am reminded of the following verse:

"Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart."

Psalms 37:4, KJV

This concept can also be applied to situations that I discuss in other articles which deal with the wayward condition of the ancient Israelites, such as "The Fruits Of Disobedience". As long as they obeyed the Lord, they had peace with their enemies round about; however, the minute that they began to disobey the Lord, He would set the heathen loose upon them in order to chastise them for their rebellion and sins. In short, if you really want to learn the fear of the Lord, as well as obedience to the Lord, just begin living the Life of Faith, and you will quickly find yourself on your knees in desperate prayer a lot more often than you probably do right now. Of course, you will also learn to recognize the Lord's wonderful provision as well, and be much more grateful for everything that He chooses to provide for you.

However, there is more to the First Century Church blueprint than what we have examined thus far. When these First Century new converts to the Faith forsook their previous lifestyles and secular jobs, exactly what did they do with their money, their properties, their possessions, etc.? The financial plan of the New Testament Church is clearly explained to us in the following verses:

"And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need."

Acts 2:44-45, KJV

"Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every

man according as he had need."

Acts 4:34-35, KJV

"Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."

Philippians 4:11, KJV

"Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."

Hebrews 13:5, KJV

While this may shock a few of my readers, the truth of the matter -- according to the previous verses -- is that the First Century Church consisted of Christian Communists. Now, please don't become alarmed. I am not referring to Soviet Communists or Chinese Communists. The primary difference between the First Century Disciples and Russian or Chinese communists -- aside from the atheist nature of the latter -- is that the Early Christians were motivated to share their possessions by Divine Love, whereas modern communism is the result of an oppressive regime of human origin.

While communism today is obviously fueled by fear, oppression and suppression, the First Century Christians freely chose to share their lives -- and their possessions -- due to a common goal of furthering the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and because of the God-inspired Love which bound them together. They shared everything according to each person's need. They didn't live selfishly in their own homes with their own possessions. They didn't say "This is mine because I worked hard for it, and you can't have it!".

In light of these Biblical truths, it becomes obvious what a reproach some modern Christians are to the Original Pattern that was established by Jesus Christ and His First Century followers. Please notice that the previous verses state that the new converts to the Faith sold everything. This included their very houses. These people were extremely serious about serving the Lord with all of their hearts, souls and minds; exactly as Jesus had required of them. Let me emphasize again that the Disciples weren't namby-pamby go-to-church-on-Sunday Christians. They did not compromise their faith by working a forty-hour week and then just attend fellowships on weekends when they had the time; or after the weekend football game was over. They fellowshiped every single day, because they were living and working together for the Lord all of the time in true Christian unity and love.

Oh that more of us would be willing to forsake our selfish lives and live like that today! What a divided, secular lot we have become during the past two thousand years!

What is also interesting to note regarding the First Century Church blueprint is that poor people were not the only ones who embraced the fledgling Christian Faith. If some of these people possessed homes and lands to sell, then they must have been rather affluent. We also know that some of them -- such as the Apostle Paul, for example -- must have also been very well-educated. I am reminded of how Moses was forced to leave his comfortable life of wealth and fame in Egypt, in order to become a flaming Prophet of the Lord. As you may recall, this came about as a result of Moses being forced to flee for his life after Pharaoh discovered that he had killed an Egyptian. These events in the life of Moses are briefly described in the verses below:

"Now when Pharaoh heard this thing, he sought to slay Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian: and he sat down by a well."

Exodus 2:15, KJV

"By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible."

Hebrews 11:24-27, KJV

Considering the preponderance of Scriptural evidence that we have now examined, how can anyone possibly doubt that this was -- and still remains -- the New Testament Blueprint for Christian living? As we have seen, our brethren of the First Century took serving the Lord quite seriously; just as the ancient Israelites also learned to take serving the Lord very seriously under the leadership of men such as Moses, Joshua and Caleb. Just as the Lord was quick to deal with murmurers and complainers in the camp of the Israelites, He also did not tolerate any nonsense or dishonesty within the ranks of the First Century Disciples. This becomes quite evident by the account of Ananias and his wife Sapphira, as found in Acts chapter five. Consider the following verses:

"But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, And kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God. And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things. And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him. And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in. And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much. Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out. Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband. And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things."

Acts 5:1-11, KJV

Now, obviously, the Scriptures that we have examined in this series present a very tall order, and a tremendous challenge, for anyone who claims to be a Christian, and who enjoys a comfortable, secure, materialistic life in the societies of the Westernized world. While some people may argue that this mode of Christian living and fellowship is not feasible in our modern day, allow me to again remind you of what Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Hebrews:

"Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever."

In a word, God has not changed, His plan has not changed, and His ability to provide our every need has most certainly not changed. It would seem then that if any change has taken place, it has occurred within our own hearts and lives. As I briefly mentioned in part two, and more amply explain in a number of other articles, it was only several hundred years after those first fiery events that are described for us in the four Gospels and in the Book of Acts, that Christianity cooled off, compromised, and basically solidified into the spiritual block of ice that it in large part remains today.

With the slow passage of time, and the weight and ways of the world continually bearing down upon them, the successors of the First Century Christians eventually lost the fire, they lost the love, and they lost the vision regarding what Christian evangelism is all about. They became one with an ungodly world which in previous centuries had rejected them, persecuted them, and killed them.

While I and a number of other Christian writers often expose the lies and sins of the Roman Catholic church -- please read "Lies And Deceptions Of The Roman Catholic Church", for one example -- none of us can use the failures of the so-called "holy mother church" since the Fourth Century, when it first compromised with the Roman Empire, and become one with the world, as an excuse, or as a red herring, to try to avoid the fact that we are each to blame. Compromise begins in the life of each one of us. We cannot blame the Roman Catholic Church, or even our own church, for our failure to serve the Lord as we know that we should, any more than we can blame Adam and Eve for our personal sins.

While it is true that we may have inherited our sinful nature from the First Pair, nevertheless, as I explain in articles such as "Free Will And Personal Choice", each of our lives is a direct result of our own personal choices and decisions. In fact, we can't even blame Satan, as much as many of us would like to do exactly that. If there is compromise in our lives, it is because we have knowingly allowed it to occur. As the old saying goes, "the buck stops here".

In my view, there are basically three main reasons why most Christians today do not follow the Biblical example of the Book of Acts. These reasons are a lack of faith, a lack of love, and a fear of persecution. Many Christians today claim to possess faith, but it is for the most part a false, dead, pretentious faith. As the Apostle James wrote in his Epistle:

"What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works . . . For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."

James 2:14-18, 26, KJV

If our faith is truly a living faith, then we should pattern our lives according to the First Century Blueprint that is laid out for us in the Gospels, in the Book of Acts, and in

the Epistles. In describing the dismal condition of our faith at the time of His Return, the Lord stated the following in the Gospel of Luke:

". . . Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?"

Luke 18:8b, KJV

One of the primary reasons why so many Christians today no longer have the faith to believe in God's promises to supply their needs, is simply because their lives are so taken up by the things of this world, and the affairs of this life, that they have sorely neglected God's Word and their time of daily communion with Him. As we saw in part three, the Apostle Paul tells us:

"No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier."

2 Timothy 2:4, KJV

In fact, as you may know, many Christians no longer even do the one-hour ritual every week, although there are certain justifiable reasons for that particular trend. If we aren't willing to spend time in God's Word -- it requires effort on our part to make time for Bible study -- how can we possibly expect to have a living, thriving faith which will motivate us to obey what we find written within the pages of God's Word? As the Apostle Paul informs us in his Epistle to the Romans:

"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

Romans 10:17, KJV

I have written extensively regarding this very same issue in many other articles, so I won't belabor the point here.

Please go to part five for the continuation of this series.

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End Of File

Where Are The First Century Churches? - Part 5

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A Lack Of Genuine Christian Love, Crammed Like Sardines In The Cities, We Are Spiritually Separated From Each Other, Selfishness And "Me First" Generation, Failure Of Communal Societies, Fear Of Persecution, Fear Of The Jews, An Unholy Alliance Between Government And Religion, Challenges Facing Modern Christian Communities, We Are In The World But Not Of The World, Balancing Privacy With Obligation To Be Witnesses Of Our Faith, Modern Christianity's Similarity To Church Of

Laodicea, First Century Jews' Resistance To Christ, A Temple Not Made With Hands, Stephen's Martyrdom, Putting Our Faith Under God's Scriptural Magnifying Glass, Living Our Lives According To Our Own Faith Without Condemnation, Nature And Structure Of First Century Church, True Church Is The Body Of Believers, Christ Is The Cornerstone Of Our Spiritual Temple, Global False Religious System Of Churches, The Home Church

Aside from our lack of faith, our failure to obey God's Word is also due in part to a lack of genuine Christian love. As we saw in part four, Jesus said that faith would be severely lacking at the time of His Return. But that is not all that the Lord had to say. He also pointed out that true spiritual love would be absent as well, as we see by this verse:

"And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold."
Matthew 24:12, KJV

In other words, there will be so much sin on the Earth at the time of the Lord's Return, that love will be diminished. In the previous verse, the word "wax" is an old English word which means to grow cold, or to be made cool, or cold, as by blowing. It is translated from the Greek word "psucho". In other words, Jesus is describing a period of time which will be characterized by a spiritual coldness in people's hearts, and a lack of warmth and brotherly love.

Sadly, we don't have to look very far in order to determine that this kind of situation certainly exists in our own day. Many people today don't even know the neighbors who live in their same apartment building, or on their same neighborhood block. Despite the fact that many people now live in cities where they are crammed together like canned sardines, they are still spiritually separated from each other by great distances. They don't even know each other's names as they pass each other silently in the hallways; and many of them even carry guns or knives as a means to protect themselves from potential harm. Clearly, we live in an age which is characterized by fear and mistrust, and certainly not by love.

If people are no longer willing, or are simply incapable of opening up their lives to each other in a spiritual sense, they certainly are not going to be able to share both their lives, as well as their possessions, in a physical sense, as we saw earlier in this series. There is simply no way that such people will be able to follow the blueprint which was established by the First Century Church. Recent decades in which the "me first" attitude has so strongly prevailed over our society certainly attest to the truth of my words. While some people may not realize it, even the fact that this time is so characterized by selfishness is itself the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy. I discuss this very same subject in the article entitled "Selfishness: A Prophesied Sign Of The Endtime!". Several Scriptures which come to mind are the following:

"And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."
Luke 12:15, KJV

"This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall

come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy . . . "

2 Timothy 3:1-2, KJV

Thus, we can plainly see that unless we have true Faith and true spiritual Love burning in our hearts, it is virtually impossible to live the First Century Blueprint, as laid down by Jesus and His early Disciples. In decades gone by, many attempts have been made to create communal societies, such as are described in the Book of Acts. However, because the majority of them were lacking in the primary ingredient, and the cement which is required to hold them together -- that of course being faith in Jesus Christ -- they were doomed to failure from the very start. Eventually, many succumbed to their own selfish passions. Because many such communities were based upon physical human love -- meaning free sex and drugs in many cases -- it was inevitable that they would result in dismal failure.

However, this was not the case with all of them. There have been some communes which have managed to survive, despite a great deal of harassment and persecution from government and church authorities, who view said communities as a threat to their system of economic and spiritual slavery. As I stated in part four, it is precisely this fear of persecution by the powers-that-be -- both government and religious -- or perhaps by people who have been brainwashed into believing the lies which have been promoted by these authorities, which to some degree has prevented certain Christian communities from ever getting started, even though there was a sincere desire to do so.

As I explain in such articles as "Dracula: Fight Fear With The Word, Faith And Love", this same fear of persecution was also experienced by the early Disciples and the First Century Church; and the source of the fear was the same then as it is today; that is, government authorities -- meaning the Romans -- and organized religion -- meaning the Jewish religious Elders. It becomes quite evident that this was so in verses such as the following:

"Howbeit no man spake openly of him for fear of the Jews."
John 7:13, KJV

"These words spake his parents, because they feared the Jews: for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue."
John 9:22, KJV

"And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus."
John 19:38, KJV

"Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you."
John 20:19, KJV

The spiritual force which prompted the marriage between the Roman Imperial Government and the leadership of Israel two thousand years ago, is the very same force which works today

to unite modern government and organized religion into a very similar unholy alliance. That force has a name and a face, and it is Satan himself, as we see by this verse, in which Jesus plainly tells the Jewish Elders who their true father really is:

"Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it."

John 8:44, KJV

The Apostle Peter likewise admonishes us to beware of the machinations of the Devil when he writes the following:

"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:"

1 Peter 5:8, KJV

The New Testament clearly reveals that through the satanic persecution of Jesus Christ, the Roman authorities -- who were represented by Pontius Pilate at that time -- and the Jewish authorities -- who were represented by King Herod -- were united in a common cause and became friends, as we see by this verse:

"And the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends together: for before they were at enmity between themselves."

Luke 23:12, KJV

So again, just as occurred two thousand years ago at the time of Christ, modern government and organized religion sometimes work hand-in-hand in order to suppress anyone who attempts to live outside of the system mold and accepted societal norms. This no doubt presents a serious challenge for anyone who may entertain the possibility of establishing a Christian commune which is based upon the First Century Church blueprint, in our modern day.

There are a number of factors which work against the success of any such modern Christian communities. In addition to the points which we have already covered, these include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Mandatory school attendance being enforced by truancy laws
2. An atmosphere of fear and mistrust which has purposely been cultivated within society, so that people automatically question anything which appears a little out of the usual
3. The aggressive steps that are being taken to move society away from a physical monetary system -- meaning bills and coinage -- to a fully electronic computerized credit system

Because of these and other such factors working against them, such modern Christian communities would by necessity have to be in large part divorced from society. Such communes would have to be founded upon, as well as guided by, a great deal of faith, unselfish love, and mutual cooperation and sharing between all parties, exactly as is prescribed in the Book of Acts. These Christian communities would have to be totally self-sufficient, producing their own food, making their own clothes, building their own homes, providing the necessary schooling for their children, etc. They would in effect be

in the world, but not of the world, as we saw in part four of this series.

Of course, being as our primary calling as Christians is to be a witness to the world, these communes would also have to have some system of security implemented, whereby they could protect themselves from outsiders -- perhaps even by keeping their exact location a secret -- but which at the same time would still allow them to be witnesses of their faith. But, given the current level of electronic surveillance which is now possible, maintaining full privacy is more than likely impossible to achieve. In fact, endeavoring to maintain full privacy may simply engender more suspicion on the part of outsiders -- such as government authorities -- who may not fully understand the desire to live according to the plan of the First Century Church.

It should be evident to you the reader that there is a clear difference between denominations within organized religion which claim to be First Century Churches, and those Christian communities which truly merit this title. The verses which we have examined reveal that Christian communities which truly deserve this title will demonstrate it not only through their words, but more importantly, by their deeds, which obviously means through their example of living the Life of Faith, as it is described for us in the pages of the New Testament. It is plain to see that most of us fail to meet these stringent requirements.

To reiterate a point that I made earlier, people who simply engage in constructing church buildings, who attend service one hour a week while they selfishly live their own lives for the remainder of the week, and who devote more of their time to earning money than to serving the Lord and being a witness of their Christian faith, do not qualify as First Century Christians, according to the Scriptures. The truth of the matter is that such people are lukewarm compromisers who feign to serve God, while in reality, most of their time is devoted to serving themselves, and the false god of this world, who offers them an easy, comfortable, materialistic life served on a platter.

This lukewarm form of modern Christianity is similar to the Church of Laodicea, which is described for us in the Book of Revelation as being rich, lazy, self-satisfied and fat. The Church of Laodicea had lost the vision, and it certainly was not living the message of the Gospel, or following the First Century pattern, as we see by the following verses:

"And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent."
Revelation 3:14-19, KJV

What I find so alarming about this description of the Church

of Laodicea, is the fact that it took so little time -- more than likely only a few decades -- for it to decline to such a dismal spiritual condition. What does that say regarding our Christian faith today two thousand years later? How much have we become sidetracked in the things of this world?

The previous paragraphs no doubt contain a powerful message which many modern-day Christians will not be able to accept. It will make many Christians uncomfortable, and quite a few will in fact find it offensive, because it reveals certain things about their own lives which they do not wish to hear or recognize. Of course, this is nothing new. Even in Jesus' day, the Jewish Scribes and Pharisees obviously did not want their failures and sins exposed. Thus, Jesus said of them:

"If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin."

John 15:22, KJV

As I explain in other articles, following Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection, the Jewish religious leadership was still not willing to accept the truth, and recognize Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah. Thus, not only did they attempt to hide the truth concerning His Resurrection, but they continued in their murderous actions of trying to silence His emissaries of truth -- that is, the Lord's Apostles and Disciples -- by persecuting and killing them. In one example that is found in the Book of Acts, we are told that prior to stoning Stephen, they actually covered their ears, because they simply did not want to hear the truth regarding the corrupt nature of their false religious system. Exactly what was the truth that so upset them? It was that God does not dwell in temples made with hands. God is not into church buildings. Consider the following verses:

"Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet, Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest? Hath not my hand made all these things? Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it. When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man, whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

Acts 7:48-60, KJV

How many of us today likewise harden our hearts, and choose to cover our ears, because we don't wish to hear the truth? Are we so afraid to have our faith examined under the Lord's magnifying glass of the Scriptures, because we already know

that doing so will expose the shallowness and hypocrisy of our faith, just as Jesus and His followers did with the Jews of their day? Are we afraid to discover that perhaps we are not quite as Christian as we thought we were? Are we afraid that the Lord will look at our "weekend Christianity" and find us wanting?

While I have set the bar rather high in this series -- even though it is no higher than what Jesus Himself set it almost two millennia ago -- I do recognize and fully accept that not everyone is called to be a full-time Disciple of Christ. Not everyone is able to, or willing, to drop out of man's secular system in order to follow Jesus Christ according to the First Century Church blueprint. In fact, not everyone is chosen to do so. We must each choose to live our lives according to our own personal faith, regardless of what anyone else thinks. As the Lord Himself said in the Gospels:

"For many are called, but few are chosen."
Matthew 22:14, KJV

"Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you."
John 15:16, KJV

This series is mainly directly at those people who do feel called by the Lord to live a lifestyle which is comparable to His First Century followers. Its purpose is likewise to motivate all of us to examine our hearts, and to make sure that we are living a life which is pleasing to the Lord, while at the same time, not boasting beyond our measure. In other words, let's not pretend that we are holier than we are, or that we are living like the Christians of the First Century, when the truth is that we probably are not.

As I said a moment ago, if we honestly feel that our hearts are right with the Lord, and that our lives are pleasing in His sight, then we should not allow anyone, or anything, to convince us otherwise, or to condemn us, as we alone must answer to the Lord for our actions and the decisions that we make in this life. This truth is clearly born out in verses: such as the following:

"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."
Romans 8:1, KJV

"One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind."
Romans 14:5, KJV

"Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth."
Romans 14:22, KJV

"For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things."
1 John 3:20, KJV

"Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God."

1 John 3:21, KJV

So while I have presented a strong challenge to my readers to accept the calling of full-time Discipleship, please do not feel condemned if this goal is currently beyond your personal reach and level of faith. As I said, if nothing else, I hope that the powerful truths which I have shared here, will at least motivate you to reexamine your current walk with the Lord. Perhaps I have touched on a few areas where you can make some improvements in your life that will help to strengthen your faith and enhance your relationship with the Lord. And again, I hope that this series will help those of you who hold an inflated image of yourselves, or of your church, to realize that you are not the high and mighty Christians that you believe yourselves to be.

Having said that, if this series sparks the flame of faith in the hearts of a few of my readers, so that they will dare to take God at His Word, and will try to accomplish what I have described here, then I will be even more pleased. If you are such a person of faith, I would truly enjoy hearing from you regarding your successes for the Lord. God is no doubt willing and able. Are you up to the challenge?

At this point in our series, we are now going to further examine the actual nature and structure of the First Century Church.

Compared to the complex, man-made, worldwide hierarchies we are familiar with today -- such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion, for example -- the First Century Church was actually a rather loose-knit structure. I am not speaking in terms of doctrinal unity and spiritual love, as in that regard, the Scriptures clearly reveal that they were very much bonded together; at least at first. I am speaking more in terms of their physical, organizational structure.

As I explained earlier in our series, according to the Bible, the First Century Church did not consist of a physical empire comprised of buildings; rather, the true Church was the actual Body of Believers, who initially fellowshiped in the Temple, and then later on, in the privacy of their own dwellings, and quite possibly even in multi-family houses, which today could be viewed as Christian communes. The idea of the true Church being comprised of actual people, and not of buildings, is clearly born out in the Apostle Peter's first Epistle where he writes the following:

"Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner,"

1 Peter 2:5-7, KJV

Thus we have a symbolic picture of God's spiritual Temple in which Jesus Christ is the Cornerstone, and we ourselves are living, breathing stones which form the rest of His Temple. You may recall that in part two, I mentioned that our English word "church" is derived from the Greek word "ekklesia", and that this word refers to an assembly of people, and not to a building. This idea is further born out by a number of other

verses which are found in the New Testament, such as the following, where Jesus informs the woman of Samaria that the Temple worship in Jerusalem will come to an end, because God desires that we worship Him in Spirit and in Truth:

"Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."

John 4:21-24, KJV

So Jesus said it, and He was killed by the Jews. The martyr Stephen likewise dared to say it, and he was also murdered by the Jews. Obviously then, the Lord's First Century followers clearly understood and realized that God was not interested in temple-building -- or church-building -- because He views us as living members of His spiritual Temple, of which Christ is the chief Cornerstone. Consider the following verses which likewise verify this point:

"And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ."

1 Corinthians 10:4, KJV

"What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."

1 Corinthians 6:19-20, KJV

"And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty."

2 Corinthians 6:16-18, KJV

"For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

2 Corinthians 5:1, KJV

"Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name."

Revelation 3:12, KJV

"And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it."

Revelation 21:22, KJV

Despite this obvious Scriptural truth, modern religionists continue to build their expensive cathedrals, basilicas and church buildings by the thousands all over the world, and people flock to them by the millions, not realizing that they are the true Church, and not some dead, cold building.

God's Spirit dwells within them, and they do not need to go to some church building in order to find God, or to worship God. Do you realize what could conceivably happen if the entire Christian world were to suddenly recognize such a powerful truth? It is quite possible that the global false religious system would simply collapse, and the wealth of those who control it would vanish. That is one of the main reasons why religionists so heavily promote the deception that one must attend a church building, in order to be a true Christian; but that is not what the Bible teaches us.

So, exactly what is the smallest unit which can technically be defined as being a Church? Contrary to what is promoted by modern-day religionists, based on Jesus' own words, a Church can be comprised of as few as two or three members. Consider what the Lord said in the Gospel of Matthew:

"Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Matthew 18:19-20, KJV

Based on those verses, we can say that if you and your wife, or if you, your wife and your children sincerely believe in and love the Lord with all your hearts, and choose to worship Him in the privacy of your own home, you constitute a Church. Jesus is in the midst of you, and He recognizes you as a part of His Body. That is Scriptural fact, regardless of what the religionists may say.

So who are you going to believe; that popular pastor with the large congregation who criticizes you for not attending his church, and who convinces his members that you are just a backslidden Christian, or God and His Word? Please realize that God is not interested so much in quantity as He is in quality. He is more impressed by a small Christian family fellowship of earnest believers, than by a church building that is full of half-hearted Christians who are there due to political correctness and maintaining the status quo.

So this gathering together of two or three people is the smallest Church unit. We can refer to this unit as a Family Church, or as a Home Church; although you really don't even need to belong to the same biological family in order to come together for prayer, fellowship and a sharing of God's Word.

Please go to part six for the continuation of this series.

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End Of File

Where Are The First Century Churches? - Part 6

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First Century Home Churches, The Communal Church, Financial Plan And Sharing, First Century Disciples Had No Interest In Constructing Church Buildings, Jewish And Roman Persecution, The City Church, John Writes To The Seven Churches In Asia, Antioch Church Sends Help To Jerusalem, The Financial Plan, Leadership Structure Of The First Century Church, Husband Is Head Of The Family And Home Church, Women Who Usurp Authority Over Husbands, Peter And Paul's Advice Concerning Christians Remaining With Unbelieving Spouses, Electing Church Elders, Distinction Between Apostles And Elders, The Origin Of The Presbyterian Church, Respect For Wisdom Of The Patriarchs And Elders, Foolishness Of Rehoboam, God's Divine Foresight, Office Of A Bishop, Origin Of Episcopal Church, The Deacon

As I concluded in part five, according to Christ's teachings, a Church can consist of as few as two or three members, and that includes a Christian family which chooses to worship in the privacy of their own home. This is a Home Church, or a House Church, and it is precisely what we saw in part two, where I shared the following verses with you:

"Likewise greet the Church that is in their house. Salute my wellbeloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia unto Christ."

Romans 16:5, KJV

"The Churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the Church that is in their house."

1 Corinthians 16:19, KJV

"Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the Church which is in his house."

Colossians 4:15, KJV

As we likewise saw in part three, in some cases, the Apostles probably inherited large homes from some of the new converts. Rather than sell them all, some of these homes may have been kept and used to accommodate several family units, and maybe a few other individuals as well. Perhaps these became what we may refer to as Communal Churches because the Disciples lived communally. As we learned in part four, the members of these Communal Churches would forsake their personal belongings, or else they would give the money which they had gained through selling their possessions to the Apostles. The Apostles would then share the money they had received amongst the Disciples in the city, so that every one's needs were met.

I would guess that Communal Churches consisted of perhaps a few dozen people at best; but there could have been a lot of these Communal Churches in the same city. That may explain how the Apostles were able to accommodate several thousand new converts in one day. In other words, perhaps they would simply divide up the new converts into groups, and assign them a place to stay. Some might remain as individual Family, or Home, Churches, while others would be moved into Communal Churches.

I haven't found any Scriptural evidence to support the idea that thousands of these new converts all camped out together on someone's property, although that is one possibility. If

we take into consideration the level of persecution that the First Century Disciples were forced to endure at the hands of the Jewish Elders, and then later at the hands of the Roman authorities, such a large gathering of people would have no doubt been viewed as a threat to established authority. Thus, smaller Home Churches and Communal Churches were probably the norm, in my view.

As I mentioned before, there were no large, central, concrete buildings with a tall steeple, soft padded pews, organ music, stained-glass windows, air-conditioning, plush wall-to-wall carpet, etc., to house hundreds or thousands of new converts. Do you honestly believe that the hard-hearted Jews, who were spread out all over Europe and the Mediterranean area, would have allowed the First Century Disciples to actually construct such a towering structure that would pose such a clear threat to synagogue attendance? Obviously not. Such a building would have been an easy target for the Jewish religious authorities. Furthermore, as I explained previously, contrary to what we find happening a few centuries later when the Roman Catholic Church came to power and began a campaign of empire-building, the First Century Disciples were not the least bit interested in constructing church buildings.

Following the Home Church and the Communal Church, the next ecclesiastical level, as far as physical size was concerned, was probably what we can refer to as the City Church. As its name implies, the City Church would have been comprised of all of the local Home Churches and Communal Churches in any given city. In other words, the City Church represented the full assembly of Christian converts, or Body of Believers, who dwelt in any particular city, regardless of with whom or where they fellowshiped and lived. One example of this can be found in the Book of Revelation, where the Apostle John was instructed to write a letter to each of the seven Churches in Asia, as we see here:

"John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne . . . Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea."
Revelation 1:4, 11, KJV

As the previous verses demonstrate, and as chapters two and three of Revelation also reveal, John addressed each Church by the name of the city in which it was located, showing that he was addressing all of the local Churches which had been established within one particular city. In other words, John was addressing the whole Christian Body, or assembly, within that city.

During the First Century, a Church in one city would often share their surplus with a needy Church in another city. One clear example of this can be found in the following verses from Acts chapter eleven, where Paul and Barnabas were sent to take some relief to the Church in Jerusalem. Notice that the Disciples from each of the Churches within the city of Antioch contributed what they could -- or "according to his ability" -- and then it was collectively sent to Jerusalem:

"And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and

signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul."

Acts 11:27-30, KJV

This again confirms the First Century Church financial plan, which we first discussed in part four. You will recall that we read that "distribution was made unto every man according as he had need". Evidently then, this financial plan was not only instituted between the members of a local City Church, but also between different City Churches as well.

Based upon my examination of the Scriptures, the City Church appears to have been the highest organizational level of the First Century Church. To my knowledge, there is no Biblical evidence to support any organizational structure higher than this. Beyond the City Church, it seems that the Lord views the entire Body of Believers as His Worldwide Church; or as the Apostle John describes for us in the Book of Revelation, as His Bride. That being the case, let's take a look now at the leadership structure of the First Century Church; that is, at the men who were chosen to govern the Lord's Church on these various ecclesiastical levels.

To begin with, as the Apostles Peter and Paul inform us in their Epistles, the spiritual head of each family, or Home Church, is the husband, as we see here:

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the Church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing."

Ephesians 5:22-24, KJV

"And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him. Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them."

Colossians 3:17-19, KJV

"In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression."

1 Timothy 2:9-14, KJV

"Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear. Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who

trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands:"

1 Peter 3:1-5, KJV

In actuality, Peter and Paul were not really saying anything new. While some modern feminists enjoy pointing the finger at Paul and accusing him of being a woman-hater, the fact of the matter, is that this is actually the family structure which the Lord Himself has ordained, since the Fall from Grace by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden thousands of years ago. Please carefully consider what the Lord says to Eve following her deception by the Serpent:

"Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."

Genesis 3:16, KJV

It is clear then that just as Christ is the Head of the Body and the Church, so too, the husband is the spiritual head of the family, or Home Church. Therefore, for any woman to usurp this position from her husband, is contrary to the Doctrine of Christ and the First Century Church. You will specifically notice that Paul writes that a wife is to subject herself to her husband "in every thing" and "with all subjection".

Are there possibly exceptions to this rule? Again, Paul says that a woman is not "to usurp authority over the man". Some feminists will argue "Well, what if my husband is not a man of God? What if he doesn't even believe in Jesus?". While I can certainly understand what a difficult position this may be to find yourself in, please note that in such a situation, Peter writes that women are still to "be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives". In other words, the hope is that an unbelieving husband will be won to the Lord through the wife's example of submission. Furthermore, as the Apostle Paul also writes in his first Epistle to the Corinthians:

"And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife. But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace. For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?"

1 Corinthians 7:10-16, KJV

In short, Paul's counsel is that husbands and wives should endeavor to remain together, even if one of the two is an unbeliever. Similar to Peter, Paul informs us that not only is the unbelieving spouse sanctified by the believing spouse, but the unbelieving spouse may possibly be won to the Lord by the example of the believing spouse. However, Paul also notes that in the case where one of the two leaves the other on a

permanent basis, the other is no longer "under bondage". What Paul means is that they are no longer bound by marriage laws, and are free to marry again. However, in this same chapter, Paul also states that in the case of a separation, the ideal situation is for the spouse to remain single thereafter, in order to dedicate themselves wholly to the Lord.

Continuing with our discussion regarding the leadership of the First Century Church, the Book of Acts informs us that if several families and single individuals happened to live together in a Communal Church, it would sometimes become necessary to choose Elders from amongst all of the adult male members. These Elders would counsel together in order to resolve any matters which might arise. Thus, within one particular city, depending upon its size, there might exist several different Churches -- Home Churches and Communal Churches -- and each of these would have their own Elders. It is also possible that from amongst these Elders of each Home and Communal Church, they may have chosen City Elders. We find a clear example of choosing Elders in the following verses that are found in Acts chapter six:

"And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them."
Acts 6:1-6, KJV

Another possibility is that the aforementioned incident was not an election of Elders, but rather of Deacons. I will explain this term more fully in a moment. From reading the Scriptures, one thing we do know is that while the Apostles at Jerusalem sometimes referred to themselves as Elders, an Elder was not always necessarily the same as an Apostle. For example, the Apostle Peter referred to himself as an Elder in the following verse. His reference to "ye younger" may be implying biological age, or it could also be a reference to spiritual maturity. In either regard, what Peter is saying still holds true:

"The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed . . . Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble."

1 Peter 5:1, 5, KJV

In most cases, the Elders are clearly mentioned as being separate from the Apostles; and we can assume, below the Apostles in spiritual status. In the following verses, we clearly see Paul and Barnabas ordaining Elders in each of the City Churches that they visited:

"And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. And when they had ordained them elders in every Church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed."

Acts 14:21-23, KJV

Having read the above verses in which Elders are appointed over each City Church, compare them to the following verses where we see the terms "Apostles" and "Elders" mentioned in the very same verses. The distinction is quite obvious. Luke is clearly indicating that they are not always referring to one and the same thing:

"When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question . . . And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the Church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them . . . And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter . . . Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole Church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia:"

Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23, KJV

"And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem."

Acts 16:4, KJV

As a matter of clarification, allow me to point out that the Jewish religious leaders of the Sanhedrin were also referred to as Elders. However, this is not what the previous verses are referring to. These verses describe the leaders of the First Century Christian Church. As we have already seen, the Jewish Elders of the Sanhedrin were bent on destroying the power and the influence of the Christian Elders. This word "elder" finds its origin in the Greek word "presbuteros". As you may presume, it is from this Greek word that we derive our English word "Presbyterian", which signifies a church that is governed by a council of Elders. My Thayer's Greek English Lexicon provides us with the following information concerning this Greek word:

----- Begin Quote -----

- 1) elder, of age,
 - 1a) the elder of two people
 - 1b) advanced in life, an elder, a senior
 - 1b1) forefathers
- 2) a term of rank or office
 - 2a) among the Jews
 - 2a1) members of the great council or Sanhedrin (because in early times the rulers of the people, judges, etc., were selected from elderly men)
 - 2a2) of those who in separate cities managed public affairs and administered justice
 - 2b) among the Christians, those who presided over the assemblies (or Churches) The NT uses the term bishop, elders, and presbyters interchangeably

2c) the twenty four members of the heavenly Sanhedrin or court seated on thrones around the throne of God

----- End Of Quote -----

As can be seen, not only were these Elders the spiritually older and more mature members of the First Century Church, but they were also the physically older members as well. In both early Jewish and Christian society, these old men were normally respected for their great wisdom, spiritual insight, and understanding of God's Word. One can only imagine what considerable wisdom Noah and his sons, and the antediluvian -- or pre-Flood -- Patriarchs must have acquired after having lived for such a long time. Whenever the younger generation failed to abide by their wise advice, it often resulted in serious consequences. We find a perfect example of this in the story of foolish King Rehoboam, the son of King Solomon. Rather than follow the advice of the old men -- the Elders of Israel -- Rehoboam listened to the counsel of his younger friends. As a result of his foolishness, the Lord rent the kingdom of Israel from him. Consider the following verses:

"And king Rehoboam consulted with the old men, that stood before Solomon his father while he yet lived, and said, How do ye advise that I may answer this people? And they spake unto him, saying, If thou wilt be a servant unto this people this day, and wilt serve them, and answer them, and speak good words to them, then they will be thy servants for ever. But he forsook the counsel of the old men, which they had given him, and consulted with the young men that were grown up with him, and which stood before him: And he said unto them, What counsel give ye that we may answer this people, who have spoken to me, saying, Make the yoke which thy father did put upon us lighter? And the young men that were grown up with him spake unto him, saying, Thus shalt thou speak unto this people that spake unto thee, saying, Thy father made our yoke heavy, but make thou it lighter unto us; thus shalt thou say unto them, My little finger shall be thicker than my father's loins. And now whereas my father did lade you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke: my father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions."

1 Kings 12:6-11, KJV

As I mentioned a moment ago, and explain more fully in such articles as "The Fruits Of Disobedience", it was not long after this event occurred, that ten of the Twelve Tribes of Israel rebelled against Rehoboam, and he was only left with Judah and Benjamin. The Old Testament informs us that this development was a curse upon Rehoboam that resulted from his father Solomon's sins of not only marrying foreign women, but also of encouraging the worship of their false gods in the land of Israel. It is safe to say then, that the Lord obviously knew ahead of time exactly how Rehoboam was going to respond to the wise counsel of the Elders of Israel. As we are told in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

"Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:"

Isaiah 46:9-10, KJV

In addition to Elders, the New Testament also informs us that each First Century City Church had an Elder who was known as

a Bishop. Our English word "Bishop" is derived from the Greek word "episkope". Pronounced ep-is-kop-ay', it is from this word that the Episcopal -- or Anglican -- Church derives its name; obviously because it is governed by a body of Bishops. Turning again to Thayer's Greek English Lexicon, we find the following definition for this word:

----- Begin Quote -----

1) investigation, inspection, visitation

1a) that act by which God looks into and searches out the ways, deeds character, of men, in order to adjudge them their lot accordingly, whether joyous or sad

1b) oversight

1b1) overseership, office, charge, the office of an elder

1b2) the overseer or presiding officers of a Christian Church

----- End Of Quote -----

As the previous definition reveals, a Bishop was basically a travelling Elder who was responsible for both overseeing and visiting the Churches in his immediate area. The following New Testament verses confirm that a bishop would visit and inspect the Churches within his town or city. Under special circumstances, a Bishop's jurisdiction might extend somewhat further, as in the case of Titus and the island of Crete:

"The Lord Jesus Christ be with thy spirit. Grace be with you. Amen. [The second epistle unto Timotheus, ordained the first bishop of the Church of the Ephesians, was written from Rome, when Paul was brought before Nero the second time.]"

2 Timothy 4:22, KJV

"All that are with me salute thee. Greet them that love us in the faith. Grace be with you all. Amen. [It was written to Titus, ordained the first bishop of the Church of the Cretians, from Nicopolis of Macedonia.]"

Titus 3:15, KJV

Notice that Timothy's jurisdiction was only Ephesus; while Titus' only jurisdiction was Crete. These are the only two verses in the entire New Testament which describe the scope of a bishoprick, as the office is called. Thus, under normal circumstances, as I noted a moment ago, it would seem that a Bishop's responsibilities were limited to the Churches that were located in his own city. Part of a Bishop's job was to maintain spiritual and doctrinal unity between the Elders of each of the Churches within his jurisdiction. When John wrote his seven letters to the Churches in Asia, it's possible that those Epistles were first received by the Bishops, and then passed down the line to the various Elders of each individual Church, who then shared them with their flocks.

Thus far, we have examined the responsibilities of husbands, Elders, and Bishops, with a brief mention of the Apostles as well. I will be fully addressing the office of the Apostle in the final part of this series. Another position which we find mentioned in the pages of the New Testament is the office of the Deacon. Our English word "deacon" finds its origin in the Greek word "diakonos". Pronounced dee-ak'-on-os, it refers to a minister or to a servant. Thayer's Greek English Lexicon provides us with the following information:

----- Begin Quote -----

1) one who executes the commands of another, esp. of a master, a servant, attendant,

minister

- 1a) the servant of a king
- 1b) a deacon, one who, by virtue of the office assigned to him by the Church, cares for the poor and has charge of and distributes the money collected for their use
- 1c) a waiter, one who serves food and drink

----- End Of Quote -----

From the previous definition, we are given the understanding that the Deacon may have been an assistant to the Bishop, who helped the Bishop to perform his tasks. In other words, the Deacon may have been the Bishop's right-hand man. His primary responsibilities appear to have been to oversee the physical aspects of the City Church, so that the Bishop could devote himself to more important spiritual matters, such as prayer, study of the Word, and counseling the different Elders of his city. Perhaps this teamwork developed from the fact that Paul usually had one or more men accompanying him on his various missionary journeys, such as Silas, Barnabas, Timothy, Luke, Mark John, etc. The idea of Bishops and Deacons working as teams may be indicated by the following verse. In fact, it is difficult to tell if Paul is greeting the Church at Philippi on behalf of the Bishops and Deacons, or if he greeting the Bishops and Deacons in Philippi, thus indicating that there may have been more than one Bishop and Deacon in each of the City Churches:

"Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:"
Philippians 1:1, KJV

The only other verses in the New Testament where the word "deacon" is found, is in the following. Regardless of the Deacon's precise position within the First Century Church hierarchy, given the serious tone of Paul's comments, it appears that the office of a Deacon was only given to men of the highest calibre:

"Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless. Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things. Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus."
1 Timothy 3:8-13, KJV

Before concluding part six of this series, allow me to make one final point. You will notice that in the explanation that is provided by Thayer's Greek English Lexicon, it states that the word "diakonos" also refers to "a waiter, one who serves food and drink". It's for this reason that I previously noted that in the seventh chapter of the Book of Acts, the men who were selected may have been Deacons, and not actually Elders. More specifically, the Apostles stated during that incident, "It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables."

Please go to part seven for the continuation of this series.

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Where Are The First Century Churches? - Part 7

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Office Of The Apostle, Appointed Directly By Jesus Christ,
Responsibilities Of An Apostle, Authority Of The Apostles,
Apostolic Appointments, Barnabas Forsakes All, Selection Of
Matthias, Barnabas Introduces Paul To The Apostles, Luke
Refers To Paul And Barnabas As Apostles, Paul Chosen By God
As Apostle To The Gentiles, Paul And Barnabas Confirmed By
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Being Considered An Apostle, False Apostles And Deceivers,
Threat Of The False Jews, John's Warnings Regarding Spirit
Of Antichrist, Paul's Stern Warnings Regarding False Jews,
Antichrist Jewish Influence In So-Called Christian America,
God's Hatred Towards Annual Jewish Feast Day Observances,
God Demands And Expects Repentance On The Part Of The Jews,
The Only Way To Truly Honor God Is Through Accepting Christ,
No One Can Approach The Father Except Through Jesus Christ

Undoubtedly, the most important position within the First
Century Church was that of the Apostle. In his Epistles, the
Apostle Paul clearly places Apostles at the top of the list
in terms of spiritual authority within the First Century
Church, as we see by the following verses:

"And God hath set some in the Church, first apostles,
secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles,
then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of
tongues."

1 Corinthians 12:28, KJV

"And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some,
evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the
perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for
the edifying of the body of Christ:"

Ephesians 4:11-12, KJV

Our English word "Apostle" finds its origin in the Greek word
"apostolos". Pronounced ap-os'-tol-os, Thayer's Greek English
Lexicon informs us that an Apostle is a delegate, messenger
or one sent forth with orders. In the case of the original
Twelve Apostles, it is clearly evident from the New Testament
Scriptures that these twelve men were appointed directly by
Jesus Christ Himself to be His earthly delegates, messengers,
emissaries and ambassadors for the Kingdom of God. Consider
the following verses:

"And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he
gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out,
and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of

disease. Now the names of the twelve apostles are these; The first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip, and Bartholomew; Thomas, and Matthew the publican; James the son of Alphaeus, and Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus; Simon the Canaanite, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Matthew 10:1-6, KJV

"And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles; Simon, (whom he also named Peter,) and Andrew his brother, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew, Matthew and Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called Zelotes, And Judas the brother of James, and Judas Iscariot, which also was the traitor."

Luke 6:13-16, KJV

"Therefore also said the wisdom of God, I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they shall slay and persecute:"

Luke 11:49, KJV

"And when the hour was come, he sat down, and the twelve apostles with him."

Luke 22:14, KJV

"Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you."

John 15:16, KJV

"Until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen:"

Acts 1:2, KJV

From the previous verses, we can determine that out of the many Disciples who obviously followed the Lord during the First Century, Jesus only chose twelve of them to be His leading men. Exactly what were the orders that these Twelve Apostles were given to carry out for the Lord? The answer can be summarized in the following verses:

"And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."

Mark 16:15, KJV

"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

Acts 1:8, KJV

Aside from being directly chosen by God Himself, and being given specific orders and a mission to carry out, the job of the Apostle is also to set down, maintain and preserve the doctrine of the Lord's Worldwide Church. I am not referring to denominational churches or organizations who set up their own leaders whom they call apostles -- such as the Mormons do, for example -- or to an individual who appoints himself as an apostle or prophet. Rather, I am speaking about the

worldwide Christian Body of Believers -- that is, the Bride of Christ -- who recognize Jesus as the only legitimate Head of His universal Church. The following Scriptures clearly establish that only God's appointed Apostles have been given the spiritual authority to set down the doctrinal foundation for His Church:

"And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."
Acts 2:42, KJV

"And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem."
Acts 16:4, KJV

"Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;"
Ephesians 2:19-20, KJV

"And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb."
Revelation 21:14, KJV

According to the Scriptures, apart from being directly chosen by Jesus Christ, it appears that the only other way that a person can possibly become an Apostle, is if he is appointed as such by one of the Lord's existing Apostles. Such may have been the case with Barnabas in Acts chapter four, where we read the following verses:

"And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus, Having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet."
Acts 4:36-37, KJV

You will notice that just as Jesus gave some of His Twelve Apostles new names, in the previous verses, Joses is also being given the new name of Barnabas. It is possible that it may have been at this point that Barnabas was accepted, not just as a regular Disciple, but rather as a fellow Apostle. However, what casts doubt on this possibility, is that only a few verses later, in the very same chapter, we read of the selection of Matthias as a replacement for Judas Iscariot. While Matthias was also chosen by the Eleven Apostles, it is interesting to note that we never hear about him again -- at least not by that name -- so I can only wonder if perhaps he wasn't the Lord's best choice. Consider these verses:

"For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishoprick let another take. Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection. And they appointed two, Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen, That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place. And they gave forth their

lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles."

Acts 1:20-26, KJV

While Matthias seems to disappear from the remaining pages of the Book of Acts following his selection, as well as from the rest of the New Testament, Barnabas, on the other hand, becomes rather prominent. In fact, he is very instrumental in introducing Paul to the Apostles in Jerusalem, as we can determine by the following verses:

"And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus."

Acts 9:26-27, KJV

The very fact that Barnabas was able to arrange this meeting between the former Christian persecutor, Saul of Tarsus, and the Apostles -- who no doubt were very security-minded at the time -- may be another indication that not only was Barnabas close to the top leadership of the First Century Church, but that he may have also been counted among them as a fellow Apostle. When new Disciples began to be won in Antioch, upon hearing about it, the Apostles chose Barnabas to go there to assist in the work. Thus we see that Barnabas was a man who was sent with a mission, which is one of the requirements for being considered an Apostle. Consider this verse:

"Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the Church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch."

Acts 11:22, KJV

While it may be difficult to determine at exactly what point Paul and Barnabas were accepted as fellow Apostles, only five chapters later -- in Acts chapter fourteen -- the writer Luke clearly identifies them as such. The following verse is taken from the incident at Lystra, Lycaonia where Barnabas and Paul were given the names of Jupiter and Mercury, after Paul had healed a man who suffered from crippled feet:

"Which when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of, they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out,"

Acts 14:14, KJV

While it could be argued that this was just Luke's opinion, personally, I don't believe that this was the case. By this time, I suspect that the Apostles in Jerusalem had begun to recognize that the Lord had indeed raised up Paul to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. On several occasions, Paul referred to his Divine Appointment as the Apostle of the Gentiles in his Epistles. Consider the following verses:

"For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office:"

Romans 11:13, KJV

"Whereunto I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity."

1 Timothy 2:7, KJV

"Whereunto I am appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles."

2 Timothy 1:11, KJV

As I explained earlier, Scriptural evidence seems to indicate that a legitimate Apostle is anyone who is either appointed directly by God, or by another already-existing Apostle. In the case of the Apostle Paul, we know without a doubt that he was chosen by Jesus Christ in a very dramatic manner on the road to Damascus. I discuss Paul's conversion in detail in the article "A Biblical Cafeteria, Or The Whole Course?". In reading the Book of Acts, we know that Paul clearly accepted his calling from the Lord. He was a man chosen by God, and he was sent on a very specific mission. When Ananias was fearful of going to heal Paul's eyes after Paul went blind as a result of his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, the Lord specifically told Ananias the following:

". . . Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:"

Acts 9:15b, KJV

Later, in Acts chapter thirteen, the Lord again confirmed the calling of both Paul and Barnabas, when He spoke through some of the Prophets of the Church in the city of Antioch, saying the following:

". . . Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them."

Acts 13:2b, KJV

We are later informed in the fourteenth chapter of the Book of Acts, that they successfully fulfilled their mission, and returned to Antioch, as we see here:

"And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled."

Acts 14:26, KJV

What I find very interesting concerning the Book of Acts, is the fact that in a red-letter edition of the Authorized King James Version of the Bible, aside from chapter one where Luke reiterates the Lord's commandment to the Eleven Apostles, the majority of the conversations that the Lord holds in the Book of Acts, are with either Ananias -- who healed Paul -- or with Paul himself. As I explain in "A Biblical Cafeteria, Or The Whole Course?", Paul clearly received all of his orders, and his understanding concerning the Salvation message, directly from the Lord. Clearly then, Paul meets every condition that is set down in the Scriptures for being considered as an Apostle. Following are some additional verses which confirm that Paul viewed himself as such:

"For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men."

1 Corinthians 4:9, KJV

"For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God."

1 Corinthians 15:9, KJV

"For I suppose I was not a whit behind the very chiefest

apostles."

2 Corinthians 11:5, KJV

"I am become a fool in glorying; ye have compelled me: for I ought to have been commended of you: for in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing."

2 Corinthians 12:11, KJV

At this point in our discussion, we are going to look at the issue of being chosen as an apostle, from the exact opposite angle. If an Apostle is one who is chosen directly by God, or by one of His authorized representatives, and who is sent on a mission with specific orders, then a person who is selected by Satan would be the exact opposite. In other words, such a person would be a false apostle. During His Earthly Ministry, the Lord clearly recognized these false apostles, and did not hesitate to expose them in His stinging rebukes. Consider the following two examples:

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves."

Matthew 23:15, KJV

"Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it."

John 8:44, KJV

The Lord was fully aware of the danger that these deceptive, evil, Law-bound vipers posed to His fledgling Church. That is why even after His departure and return to Heaven, Jesus continued to warn His followers by way of John's Revelation. The Lord knew that just as the Jewish religious Elders had fought against Him in life, they would no doubt continue to fight against His followers after His Death, Resurrection and Ascension. Thus, we find these scathing warnings in the Book of Revelation:

"I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars . . . I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan."

Revelation 2:2, 9, KJV

"Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee."

Revelation 3:9, KJV

Please notice how the Lord very specifically says that these deceivers claim to be both Apostles and Jews, when they are in fact neither one. He calls them liars, just as He did in the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John. Therefore, there should be no doubt regarding exactly who the Lord is talking about. John himself also exposed these lying Jews and false apostles who denied that Jesus is the Christ, in two of his Epistles, as we see here:

"Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son."
1 John 2:22

"And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world."
1 John 4:3

"For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward. Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds."
2 John 1:7-11, KJV

The Apostle Paul likewise clearly exposed these Jewish false brethren who feigned to be apostles, in order that they might cause doctrinal division within the First Century Church. On a number of occasions, Paul warned the Disciples to beware of these treacherous wolves. Following are some clear examples:

"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."
Acts 20:28-30, KJV

"But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him . . . For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works."
2 Corinthians 11:3-4, 13-15, KJV

"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them."
Romans 16:17, KJV

"I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed."
Galatians 1:6-9, KJV

"And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage:"
Galatians 2:4, KJV

"Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision."
Philippians 3:2, KJV

"If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself."
1 Timothy 6:3-5, KJV

"But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain. A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself."
Titus 3:9-11, KJV

Today, two thousand years later, I'm very alarmed by the fact that despite the preponderance of warnings that are found in the New Testament, there are so many Christians who have been completely fooled by the demonic deceptions of these Jewish snakes. The Lord and His Apostles clearly told us many times that these unbelieving Jews are our worst enemies; yet today, Christian America and antichrist Israel have become involved in a sickening love affair. Some Christians seem to have the mistaken impression that all is forgiven and forgotten, and that the Jews continue to be God's so-called "Chosen People", despite their blatant rejection of Jesus Christ.

Quite frankly, I don't know where they get this idea from, as it certainly doesn't agree with the aforementioned Scriptural warnings. It is my personal belief that in God's eyes, this American-Israeli "marriage" relationship amounts to nothing less than spiritual whoredom. Some American Christians have become so mesmerized, that they believe that Israel can do no wrong. Furthermore, they've been deceived into believing that recognizing, honoring and even observing Jewish feast days, in some way gives them some special edge with God. All the while, these same Christians ignore the warnings that we find in the Old Testament, where the Lord repeatedly tells the Jews that He is sick of their holy day observances, because in reality, they are absolutely meaningless. Why? Because their hearts are far from the Lord, exactly as Jesus also told them in the pages of the New Testament. Consider these example verses:

"To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine

eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood."

Isaiah 1:11-15, KJV

"I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream. Have ye offered unto me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? But ye have borne the tabernacle of your Moloch and Chiun your images, the star of your god, which ye made to yourselves. Therefore will I cause you to go into captivity beyond Damascus, saith the LORD, whose name is The God of hosts."

Amos 5:21-27, KJV

To add insult to injury, while the Jews are free to mock and criticize our Lord and Savior, and to spit at the mention of His Name, and to even blaspheme His Name on a daily basis, if a person dares to say a single word against the Jews, he is immediately accused of being antisemitic. Such is the degree of control that the Jews now hold over many Christians in the United States of America. Let me tell you this: If American Christians are not careful, one of these days, America will become just as antichrist, and just as ungodly, as Israel. In fact, I think that the process has already been in motion for quite a few years now. The way that our Christian faith is increasingly being suppressed in the American public forum, is quite alarming.

As I pointed out not too long ago on the Endtime Prophecy Net Blog, if the Jews truly want to honor God, then there's really only one way in which they can truly do it. That way is simply by humbling themselves, confessing their sins of stubbornness, pride, rebellion and disbelief, and accepting God's Mercy and Forgiveness which results from faith in the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ. That is how God wishes everyone to honor Him, because as Jesus Himself said in the Gospels:

"He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me."

Matthew 10:40, KJV

He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad."

Matthew 12:30, KJV

"Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Mark 8:38, KJV

"He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me."

Luke 10:16, KJV

". . . This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent."

John 6:29b, KJV

"And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one

which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day." John 6:40, KJV

". . . I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." John 14:6b, KJV

The previous verses make it very plain that unless the Jews are willing to accept Christ, their feast day observances will continue to remain an utter abomination to the Lord, and hollow works of hypocrisy. Furthermore, as Jesus makes clear, to reject Him is also to reject God the Father. Why? Because the Plan of Salvation through Jesus Christ was a Work of the Father. As Jesus says ". . . no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."

Please go to part eight for the conclusion of this series.

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End Of File

Where Are The First Century Churches? - Part 8

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Importance Of The First Century Prophets, Evangelists Pastors And Teachers, Correct Definition Of The Word "Perfect" In The New Testament, Various Gifts Of The Spirit, Dual Positions In The First Century Church, John Writes The Book Of Revelation, Peter's Vision In The City Of Joppa, Apostle Paul's Visions And Revelations, Summary Of First Century Church Leadership Structure, Jesus Christ Is Our Only High Priest, Intercessor And Mediator, Vicar Of Christ And Roman Catholic Quest For Power, The Pope And The Mitre, Jesus Christ Is The Bishop Of Our Souls, The Roman Catholics' Apostolic Succession Fallacy, The Apostle Peter's Activities, Location And Martyrdom, What If The First Century Church Had Selected A Pope?, Who Would They Have Chosen?, False Legitimacy Of Roman Catholic Church, Local Scope Of The First Century Church, Humble Servants And Not Oppressive Masters Of God's Church, My Closing Remarks

Returning to our main topic of discussion, in addition to the husband, the Church Elder, the Church Deacon, the Bishop, and the Apostle, you may recall from part seven that the Apostle Paul mentioned a variety of other important positions which were established within the ecclesiastical structure of the First Century Church. These included the Prophets, which Paul regarded as second in importance to the Apostles themselves. Why did Paul regard the Prophets with such high esteem? Quite simply, because as occurred in the Old Testament period, the Prophets were responsible for obtaining the Word of the Lord. Without direct guidance from the Lord via His Prophets, the

First Century Church would essentially have been rudderless. So perhaps the Prophets received the Word of the Lord by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, while the Apostles themselves were responsible for determining through prayer, how it was to be implemented within the Church.

Following the Prophets, Paul mentions evangelists, pastors and teachers in the third position. Perhaps the reason why Paul basically places them at the same level of importance, is because in reality, they are all teaching positions. In describing their responsibilities, Paul lists three things:

1. for the perfecting of the saints
2. for the work of the ministry
3. for the edifying of the body of Christ

As I have mentioned before, please note that Paul's usage of the word "perfecting" -- from the Greek "katartismos" -- has absolutely nothing to do with some kind of a sinless state. Rather, it refers to being complete. In other words, Paul is referring to acquiring a fuller knowledge of Jesus Christ and God's Will for one's life; and this is precisely what these three positions -- evangelists, pastors and teachers -- are responsible for doing. In fact, if you closely study Paul's writings, you will discover that he uses the word "knowledge" several dozen times. For example, consider the following two verses, one written by Paul, and the other by the Apostle Peter:

"For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding;"
Colossians 1:9, KJV

"But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen."
2 Peter 3:18, KJV

In the Book of Acts, we also find a verse which demonstrates that as it is used in the King James Version of the Bible, the word "perfect" generally means more complete, or fuller. To reiterate, it has nothing to do with trying to arrive at some kind of sinless state of perfection, as certain religionists would have us to believe. This proper meaning of the word "perfect" becomes even more evident as we read the following verse:

"And when Felix heard these things, having more perfect knowledge of that way, he deferred them, and said, When Lysias the chief captain shall come down, I will know the uttermost of your matter."
Acts 24:22, KJV

Following these three positions in the First Century Church -- that is, evangelists, pastors and teachers -- Paul adds those people who possess the various Gifts of the Spirit, such as the Gifts of miracles, healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues, etc. You can learn more about these Gifts in the twelfth chapter of Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians. You may also want to read my article entitled "Are The Gifts Of The Spirit For Today?".

While it is only my personal speculation, it seems to me that the positions of Prophet and Teacher, may possibly have been

filled primarily by some of the leaders we discussed in parts six and seven of this series; that is, the Apostles, Elders and Deacons. In other words, I suspect that some of them may have occupied dual positions within the First Century Church. After all, such people would probably be the most spiritually in-tune, and thus more apt to properly prophesy and teach the doctrines of the Church than anyone else. As we saw earlier, Paul did in fact view himself as being an Apostle, preacher and teacher. Furthermore, there are a few examples in the New Testament which demonstrate that at the very least, Peter, John and Paul received visions and revelations from the Lord.

John, of course, received the Book of Revelation while on the isle of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. While in the city of Joppa, Peter had a vision of a sheet full of animals descending from the sky in Acts chapter ten, as we see here:

"On the morrow, as they went on their journey, and drew nigh unto the city, Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour: And he became very hungry, and would have eaten: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance, And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: Wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven."
Acts 10:9-16, KJV

Aside from his life-changing encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul mentions in his Epistle to the Galatians, that the Gospel which he preached was "by the revelation of Jesus Christ", and that he did not receive it from any man. Furthermore, in the twelfth chapter of his second Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul also briefly mentions that on at least one particular occasion, he took a journey out of his body. Consider the following verses:

"But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ."
Galatians 1:11-12, KJV

"I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, [whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;] such an one caught up to the third heaven."
2 Corinthians 12:2, KJV

It seems clear then that all of these men, and perhaps some of the other Apostles as well, were more than qualified to hold these important positions as Prophets and Teachers in the First Century Church. In the following verse, Paul also indicates that Bishops must likewise be apt to teach:

"A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;"
1 Timothy 3:2, KJV

Thus, if we consider all of the information which we have

examined in this series, perhaps the spiritual hierarchy of the First Century Church can be summarized with the following list. Let me mention here that this is only speculation on my part, as there simply is not enough information available in the New Testament, to make it absolutely clear. In fact, it is possible that some of these terms may have described what were actually interchangeable positions within the Church. In the case of the term "Elder", I have already proven that this is so:

1. Husband over the immediate family of a Home Church.
2. Elders over a Communal Church and/or City Church.
3. Deacon who assisted and accompanied the Bishop.
4. Bishop over the collective Churches within his city.
5. Apostle appointed directly by the Lord.
6. Jesus Christ, the Bishop of Bishops, over everyone.

One thing of which I am relatively certain, is that it was never the Lord's intention for His First Century followers to select an individual who would serve as an overseer of an entire country, and much less of the entire world Christian Body, as we see in certain modern-day religions. While early Judaism was headed by the High Priest, as I clearly explain in the series "Is Jesus The Only Begotten Son Of God?", with His Death on the Cross, Jesus became our only High Priest and Intercessor before God the Father, and we absolutely do not require any other High Priest, Intercessor or Mediator, than Him. Please consider the following verses:

"For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;"

1 Timothy 2:5, KJV

"But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises."

Hebrews 8:6, KJV

"And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance."

Hebrews 9:15, KJV

"And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel."

Hebrews 12:24, KJV

It should be obvious to you then, that we do not require a so-called "Vicar of Christ", or any other elevated, spiritual authority, beyond those which are described for us within the pages of the New Testament. That alone is the First Century Church blueprint which we are to follow. As I mention in a number of my articles, the practice of selecting a Pope was purely an invention of the Roman Catholic Church, in order to consolidate its power several hundred years after the time of Christ and the first Apostles. What may surprise and shock some of you to know, is the fact that the mitre which is worn on the head of the Roman Catholic Pope, is designed after the

mitre which was worn by the Jewish High Priest two thousand years ago. You can confirm this for yourself, by reading the books of the Pentateuch in the Old Testament.

According to the Authorized King James Version of the Bible, the very next person in command above the Apostles and the Bishops, is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who Peter refers to as the "Bishop of your souls". To reiterate, there is no mention of an Archbishop, or of Cardinals, or of a Pope, or of a Most Reverend so-and-so, or of anyone else in between in the Scriptures. As far as I can tell, all of these other positions are of human fabrication. Consider the following verse:

"For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls."
1 Peter 2:25, KJV

Thus again it becomes clear that the Roman Catholic doctrine which claims that Peter was the first Pope is utterly false. Aside from the events that are described in the four Gospels and in the Book of Acts, the only other things which we know about Peter according to the King James Version of the Bible, are that he spent some time in a place called Babylon, where he either founded and/or headed a Church, and that, based on Jesus' own prophecy, he may have eventually been crucified by the Romans at some undetermined location. Please consider the following verses:

"By Silvanus, a faithful brother unto you, as I suppose, I have written briefly, exhorting, and testifying that this is the true grace of God wherein ye stand. The Church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, saluteth you; and so doth Marcus my son."
1 Peter 5:12-13, KJV

"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me."
John 21:18-19, KJV

Even if the First Century Church had chosen to elect a Pope -- which was totally impossible due to heavy persecution -- I suspect that it probably would have selected Paul, and not Peter. A careful examination of the Scriptures reveals that Paul outshone Peter in some areas. This is not to criticize Peter by any means. Once the Lord had dealt with his pride, Peter became a great Apostle of the Lord and a pillar of the Church at Jerusalem. However, the successful evangelization of Southern Europe and Western Asia, which eventually became the seat of the Roman Catholic Pope, is an achievement which clearly should be credited to Paul and his companions.

Paul had the faith to launch out, while Peter and the other Apostles were still bound to Jerusalem, where they fell into compromise with the Law-bound Jewish concision. The Gentiles knew Paul. He lived, preached, and travelled amongst them. He won many of them to the Lord. I think he would have been their choice for the first Pope. It was only later, perhaps after seeing the actual fruit of Paul's labors, that Peter mustered up the faith to leave Jerusalem and go to Babylon. If you are interested in learning about my personal theory

regarding where this Babylon may have been located, please consider reading the article entitled "A Biblical Mystery Solved: Peter's Babylon Revealed?".

However, I stand by my position that the First Century Church never really elected a Pope. As many non-Catholics recognize, the Roman Catholic Church has used the deception of so-called "apostolic succession", in order to support their false claim of being God's "one true church" and "one true faith". While the Roman Catholics boast of their long list of Popes, the fact of the matter is that until about three hundred years after the martyrdom of Peter and Paul, there was no Pope. As I explain in other articles, the authority of the Pope came about as a result of a serious compromise between Rome and the third-generation Christians during the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great.

The Scriptures make it rather clear that both Peter and Paul were more interested in the evangelization of the world, than in a pompous position and title which was later invented by the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, I firmly believe that it is due in part to the so-called "improvements" that were made by these power-hungry, self-appointed religious leaders, that modern Christianity is so divided and in such a mess today.

Everything which I have discovered in the Scriptures points to the fact that the organizational structure of the First Century Church was limited to each town or city, or at the very most, to a local area, such as in the case of the island of Crete. There is no indication of an overbearing hierarchy as we see in the world today. The Churches within the same city were bonded together by their travelling Bishop and the Deacon who may have accompanied him. Likewise, the Churches in different cities were bonded together by a common faith in Jesus Christ, by a courier system, by the Spirit of Love, and by an occasional visit from an Apostle. This is all born out in the Book of Acts, as well as in the Epistles.

The understanding that we acquire from an actual reading of the New Testament, is that each Church was designed to be a local, self-sustaining entity, which was dependent upon the Lord as much as possible, and not upon human figures. If we read the Epistles carefully, we will discover that while the Apostles offered a lot of advice, they never ordered anyone to do anything. Even in the severest cases -- such as with the sexual problems which occurred at Corinth, or when false brethren began to sneak into the Churches -- all the Apostles did was offer their advice by basically saying "This is what we think you should do." As the Apostle Peter wrote in his first Epistle, the leaders of the First Century Church were not meant to be lords -- or oppressive masters -- over God's heritage. They were supposed to be humble servants, as we see by the following verses:

"The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away. Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore

under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time:"

1 Peter 5:1-6, KJV

Clearly then, there was no one man, or even a group of men, or a husband and wife team, overlooking a countrywide, and much less a worldwide, work, as we see today in such people as the Pope, the so-called twelve apostles of the Mormons, the former David and Maria and now Peter and Maria "prophet" team of the Family, the "True Parents" of the Unification Church -- or Moonies -- the Most Reverend of the Anglican Communion, the Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, or whatever other self-appointed leaders, prophets and holy men exist at this current time. As I point out in a number of my articles, it was when ancient Israel desired a human leader, instead of the Lord as their only king, that she went astray.

Allow me to reiterate that I am not suggesting that no human leadership is necessary whatsoever, as this would obviously be contrary to all of the information which I have shared in this series. What I am saying, is that the leadership of the First Century Church was limited to each local Church for the most part, with some oversight from the Apostles in the city of Jerusalem. There was no overbearing leadership hierarchy. After Paul and his companions established the new Churches in Western Asia and the Mediterranean region, on occasion they would visit the Churches in order to determine how they were getting along, and to encourage them in the faith; and that was it.

With these remarks, I will bring this series to a close. By now you should have a clear understanding regarding the true nature and structure of the First Century Church, as it is described for us in the Book of Acts and in the Epistles. It is my belief that this constitutes the blueprint which we are to follow today, because it is the plan which was established by Jesus Christ Himself. Likewise, you have also been given a clear understanding regarding what it means to be a full-time Disciple of Jesus Christ. With this information, you now have the knowledge to go out and do great things for the Lord. I trust that this series has been informative, instructive, and a blessing in your life.

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