

Discussing How To Restore The Early Church

Returning Intimacy and Power to the Father's Children

*"I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for,
it will be done for you by My Father in heaven.
For where two or three come together in My name, there am I with them."
(Matthew 18:19,20)*



LESSON 3

Hellenist Christianity in the US Today



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“Men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (1 Chronicles 12:32).

When the tribes of Israel gathered to crown David king, all of them journeyed to Hebron with thousands of troops. One tribe in particular, the tribe of Issachar, came with two hundred men *“who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.”*

If we today are ever to see the power of the first century Church restored, we must become a people who are *convicted about what we must do*. Then, if we have the trust that produces loving obedience to our Lord and the courage to walk against the worldly tide, we can be part of the Hebraic Restoration of the Church as Jesus founded it: His Body of followers *consumed with love* for Him, for our families, for other believers, and for the lost.

Before we consider what God is requiring of His people as He restores the Hebraic facets to the Church today, let's assess the current status of Christendom in the U.S. This will clarify the religious and cultural realm to which the Hebraic foundations are being revealed. As you read the information to follow, keep in mind that pollster George Barna has found that there is no lifestyle distinction between Christians and non-believers in the United States.

Carle Zimmerman, in his book *Family and Civilization*, provides unique insight into the culture in which Christianity currently finds itself. Zimmerman traces the typical development and eventual disintegration of the family in a variety of cultures. In most great civilizations,

including Greece, Rome and now the United States, the shifts in family relationships and in societal attitudes toward the family follow a similar course.

Initially a society will harbor great respect for the family as an *interconnected relational entity*. Individual desires are set aside in order to meet the greater family needs.

Eventually this attitude gives way to its opposite: a deification of individual rights and a depreciation of family commitments. As this shift occurs, the society begins to disintegrate. This was the pattern, Zimmerman contends, that took place among the Greeks and Romans — the same pattern that now operates in the U.S.

Zimmerman identifies three types of families, each of which prevails at various times in the life cycle of a civilization: the trustee family, the domestic family and the atomistic family.

The **trustee family** is the most stable family form. Great value is placed on the resources and truths that ancestors have passed along from generation to generation. The governing authority is normally a patriarchal structure ruled by the oldest and wisest males.

[The trustee family pattern was predominant in the earliest Church. For more on this, see [Pastoring By Elders](#).]

All the family members are welcome to give input when typical problems arise in each family unit. Because family loyalty is held in such high regard, senior members function as the recognized disciplinary agents because of their acquired wisdom and experience. They can demand obedience in a way that

those outside the family or clan might not respond to.

Divorce is rarely practiced in this type of family structure. Individuals are expected to relinquish their own interests for the greater good of the family as a whole. Family members are willing to work together selflessly to provide for the needs of their kin. The solid stability of this family type is found in the Hebraic Stream of Judaism who first placed their trust in Jesus.

The next stage of development in any civilization is the **domestic family**. This occupies a middle ground between individualism on the one hand and authority within the family on the other.

The structure in this family type values the strength of family ties and stability but leaves room for *individual expression* and a certain creative autonomy to present new ideas. The authority of the elders within the extended family is diminished. They are often replaced by, religious and state agencies. Divorce is infrequent but does occur occasionally.

A husband and a wife function as a family unit to assume major responsibility for raising their children according to the values they believe are right. Parents are willing to undergo the pain of childbirth and trials of childrearing because they view their children as an extension of themselves.

Often parents in this stage will sacrifice their own desires and interests so that they can focus on the needs and training of the next generation. They're able to see beyond their own gratification. Generally mothers and fathers of this family type are willing to forego luxury cars, upscale homes, and even time-consuming hobbies in order to have energy, time and resources for their kids.

This type of family structure epitomized Greece and Rome at the height of their culture. The subsequent decline of these civilizations occurred when the *state took over the responsibilities* that up until then had been assumed by the families.

Up until the 1950's, this structure characterized the majority of American households. But since then, the dismantling of family as a priority that ultimately led to the downfall of Greece and Rome has rapidly infected this nation.

When the ties within the family unit disintegrate, an *obsession with individualism* develops. This marks the **atomistic family** stage. Each person perceives himself as a distinct unit, disconnected from the family. Individual rights are emphasized, while family responsibilities are neglected.

Whereas self-sacrifice was the norm under the trustee and domestic families, complete and unabashed selfishness characterizes the atomistic family.

At this stage, childless liaisons and increased divorce rates are typical. Because the majority are unwilling to sacrifice for the future, fewer children are born to those who have the means to raise them.

Religious and moral standards have little effect on protecting the sanctity of the family. "The individual, having no guiding morals, changes the meaning of freedom from opportunity to *license*. Having *no internal or external guides to discipline him*, he becomes a gambler with life, always seeking greener pastures. When he comes to inevitable difficulty, he is alone in his misery."¹

Not content to suffer in silence, the shameless atomistic individual seeks out like-minded others to establish a politi-

cal “voice.” His special-interest group (gay rights, pro-abortion lobby, civil liberties), can then gain power and influence to force social institutions to meet their needs, even if the majority of citizens protest.

The sense of *personal responsibility* in the domestic family is replaced by *victimization* (“It’s not *my* fault; *someone else* is to blame!”) in the atomistic structure.

Picture a swarm of antagonistic insects engaged in mortal combat. That’s a reflection of atomistic culture at work. Individuals become obsessed with their *own* desires and concerns, and disregard the needs or suffering of others. They may respond superficially by tossing a few dollars at a catastrophe, but in general, commitments and responsibilities infringe on their personal sense of freedom.

Consider the symptoms of an atomistic society. Remember, these characteristics imploded the great civilizations of the past! Now, take a good look at U.S. society today:

- Marriage loses its sanctity as a stable, committed institution. The permanence of marriage as a *covenant* is lost. The relationship is often broken by relatively easy, “no-fault” divorce.
- Feminist movements abound as women lose their inclination for childbearing and child nurturing. The birth rate decreases. Daycare facilities replace intimate parenting as mothers are no longer motivated or encouraged to raise their own children in the security of the home.
- Public disrespect for parents, parenthood, and authority in general rises. Parenthood becomes more difficult for those still trying to rear children with biblical values. The media

impugn time-honored values and traditions.

- Young people are increasingly disrespectful of their parents and others in authority. Juvenile delinquency escalates, as do promiscuity and rebellion. Neither the legal system nor educational institutions are able to deter the unabashed violence and immorality.
- Adultery is accepted and even promoted in many circles. Alternatives to marriage, such as cohabitation, are increasingly accepted. Sexuality is flaunted, from marketing to entertainment.
- Sexual perversions of all kinds (homosexuality, rape, incest, pedophilia) move from toleration to proliferation.²

In 1986, we first began to share Zimmerman’s thoughts with clergy and other people on retreats. There was unanimous consensus that the United States had entered the atomistic stage, the period when social disintegration was occurring. A few of us began to seek ways in which we as followers of Jesus could be “salt” and “light” no matter what happened to our country.

Eventually, in 1993 our Father led us to Israel. It’s during our stay there for several months that He revealed to us what He was doing to restore that which has been lost. What HE termed “**The Hebraic Restoration**” has little to do with the Christianity touted in the U.S. today.

Our Father isn’t trying to prop up 23,000 competing denominations and sects. He’s letting it all crumble so that the Church that *Jesus* is building can arise.

It’s no small thing that marriages are being discarded in record numbers in favor of self-pursuit and personal gratifi-

cation. Under the guise of “grace”, Christians are swallowing the lie that their “happiness” is more important to God than His righteous Word.

Our Father’s heart grieves that the marriage covenant He designed to mirror in the physical realm the spiritual intimacy He wants with His called-out ones has been so defiled. Insert into the following passage many of the people you rub shoulders with in your congregation, and you’ll get an idea of the *lawlessness* that pervades Christianity in this country.

*Another thing you do: You flood the LORD’S altar with tears. You weep and wail because **he no longer pays attention** to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, ‘Why?’ It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because **you have broken faith with her**, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the **LORD made them one**? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was **seeking godly offspring**. So guard yourself in your spirit, and **do not break faith** with the wife of your youth. ‘**I hate divorce**,’ says the LORD God of Israel, ‘and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,’ says the LORD Almighty. So **guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith** (Malachi 2:13-16).*

Hellenist Christianity in the US Today

In his thought-provoking book *Marriage Savers*, author Michael McManus provides some startling facts concerning Christianity and single parenthood. He writes,

According to George Gallup, Jr., *two-thirds* of Americans are members of

churches. Seventy-three percent of first marriages are blessed by the church..., and we are troubled by the more than 50% divorce rate. Clearly, the American church — 300,000 local congregations — has access, a latent power, to influence most people. This is in sharp contrast with the church’s access in Europe, where church attendance is 4% in Finland, 12% in France, and 14% in Great Britain according to a 1986 Gallup Poll. [While these statistics are 20 years old, worship service attendance has *decreased* in Europe in the intervening years.]

Yet... Japan, with almost no Christians, has one quarter as many single parents as America, and every European country and Canada do twice as well as the United States in holding two-parent families together. Clearly, the nation with the *deepest church penetration* has the *least impact* on central issues involving rearing of children.

US: 22.9% of homes headed by a single parent;
Japan: 5.9% of homes headed by a single parent;
United Kingdom: 12.7% of homes headed by a single parent;
France: 10.9% of homes headed by a single parent;
West Germany: 17.5% of homes headed by a single parent;
Canada: 14.8% of homes headed by a single parent.

(Source: Bureau of the Census report, “*Children’s Well-Being: An International Comparison*,” Bureau of the Census, 1992.)³

In the United States, divorce among churchgoers is higher than those who *don’t* attend services. In fact, it is 50%

higher in the “Bible Belt”. Protestant clergy are among the top occupations for divorce in this nation.

Strong supportive ties between parents and their children have been shredded by crammed work schedules on one side, and peer-dependence and Internet addiction on the other. During the 1960’s, adolescence spanned ages thirteen to nineteen. In their most recent studies, however, sociologists have extended adolescence from age twelve to *over age thirty*. (This assumes that adolescence begins with the onset of puberty and ends when a person takes complete responsibility for his or her actions and decisions in life.)

Our culture has, in effect, produced a generation of “adult adolescents” ill-equipped to assume the roles of responsible adulthood and leadership.

During our time at the retreat center we were asked to conduct a singles ministry representing many different congregations in our region. We did this for about two and a half years until individual congregations began their own singles ministry.

The average age of those who attended our monthly potluck and quarterly retreats was 28-29 years. The size of the group varied from thirty to sixty people. Except for one or two, the participants had never been married. Only a few resided at home with their parents; many lived alone in apartments.

Over a several month period we encouraged these men and women to ask their parents, “Is it a joy for you to have me as your child?” The vast majority of the singles were held too captive by their fears to ask their folks that question. Perhaps seven of them did inquire. Their testimonies to the others were filled with wonderful parental love and

affirmation, much to the surprise of those who’d asked! Still, the majority couldn’t overcome their hesitance to approach the very people who had once changed their diapers. Their expectation of a painful response kept them from even broaching the topic.

Many of these people were college graduates. They’d experienced a certain measure of personal freedom due to disposable income and an enormous amount of discretionary time. Many of their options and decisions centered around what “toys” to buy and what activities could occupy those extra hours. Their maturity level was commensurate with that of the 14-17 year-olds we had guided in youth groups ten years earlier.

No matter what counsel or suggestions we presented, few allowed themselves to leave behind their navel-gazing self-focus. At that time, we were still unaware of how crippling the *demise of the three-generation family* had been on personal maturation. Family fragmentation that separated people from their grandparents, siblings and cousins left a void in healthy relational development. We observed a disquieting pattern of migration of the unmarried from one singles group to another to yet another.

About a year after we were “relieved of duty” from the singles ministry as various congregations developed their own singles groups, a man we’ll call Bill came to us. He’d been asked to start a singles group on behalf of his faith community, the largest congregation in our area.

Someone on the staff had recommended that he talk with us. After our introduction Mike asked, “Bill, do you know what hell on earth is? It’s being forty, single, and wishing you’d been married the whole time.” Bill peered at Mike sadly, replying, “I’m forty, single, and wishing

I'd been married all that time."

As we talked, Mike encouraged him to pray for an older grandparent-aged couple to lead the singles ministry. We had discovered that even in our forties, we were too young to significantly help our single friends. Bill disregarded our advice, and after one or two years of struggling with the group, suffered an emotional collapse.

***"Unless the Lord builds the house,
its builders labor in vain.
Unless the Lord watches over the city,
the watchmen stand guard in vain"***
(Psalm 127:1).

"Today, many Christians question the meaning of our forms of worship and service. They dutifully attend services and meetings, yet are burdened by the meaninglessness of so much that is traditionally a part of our churches. They sense a need for a new perspective, a new awareness... Their Sunday-at-eleven culture is timed to fall between the two milking hours in the agricultural society. Sermons remain one of the last forms of public discourse where it is *culturally forbidden to talk back*...

Made up, usually, of a small inner core of believers who assume the necessary posts of leadership with gratitude and devotion,...[leadership is] surrounded by a cloud of *uninvolved and mildly approving witnesses*... Basically, we do not want anything to happen on Sunday morning that will upset our daily routine. We want to be 'inspired,' to come away with a warm feeling, *but we do not want to be disturbed*, so subconsciously we structure the service in order to assure safe, predictable, comfortable

results...

We say that our faith must be lived—that Christ invades us to transform every aspect of daily life. Yet we *teach* this faith in formalized classes or sermons *far out of a life context*... We say that every believer is a priest, gifted and responsible for building up others in the Body of Christ. And we bring adults to church, set them down and *tell them to listen* to a teacher or to the pastor. They have *exercised no ministry, held no responsibility* but to be quiet and orderly, and have *helped no one* by their presence...

We say that parents are responsible for the Christian nurture of their children. Yet we develop *more and more church programs* to minister to them and thus promote the idea that parents can turn their children over to the church and *the church will do the job* of nurturing them...

It does not matter what we say. *What we do* talks most convincingly. And the fact is that our current church patterns and our educational programming *intellectualize Christianity*, promote *parental irresponsibility*, *prevent believers from ministering to one another*, and permit Christians to feel comfortable *without any personal ministry*." (emphasis added)⁴

Prophetically penned by Lawrence O. Richards in his book, *A New Face For The Church*, do these observations correctly describe the present state of the church in the United States? Or more specifically, can you see any similarity to what is happening in *your* congregation?

David Wilkerson, pastor of the Times Square Church in New York City, wrote

in his 6-13-94 Pulpit Series letter,

The denominational church system appears to be in the throes of death. It has almost no influence in the secular world, no mighty power in Christ. Growing numbers of ministers are falling on all sides—to adultery, covetousness, pride and perversions of all kinds. **Pastors...are bringing in entertainment and showmanship...[and] many pastors today are cowards when it comes to naming sin.** They merely go through the motions of the ministry, having a **form of godliness but no power.** It is because they have grown comfortable in their position. They have lost the touch of God and **no longer hear His voice.**⁵

Note that he drafted these words over a decade ago! The situation has vastly decayed since. In May, 1994, Wilkerson stated,

I believe the gospel can't be fully preached unless it is accompanied by the power and demonstration of the Holy Ghost—working mighty wonders, proving the gospel is true...The church today has become weak and ineffective. Why? Because it *no longer believes in the supernatural!* Theologians tell us that at some point God quit performing mighty deeds. Yet, exactly when all of this supernatural activity stopped, no one can say!" (Authors' comment: This theological position reflects *revisionism*, altering Scripture to reconcile its meaning with current cultural beliefs and standards.)

Wilkerson continues, "The miracles of this last-day church will be genuine, real, indisputable, undeniable—

able—and yet they will not be well-known. Instead, they will issue forth from the hands of **ordinary, holy, separated saints who know God and are intimate with Jesus...**If you think you're too ordinary for God to use, listen closely: God is not going to do His last-day work through big-name evangelists or pastors...The fact is, God is going to need every housewife, teenager, elderly person and all who love Him to carry out His mighty work!⁶

"As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher!

What massive stones!

What magnificent buildings!'

'Do you see all these great buildings?' replied Jesus. 'Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down'" (Mark 13:1,2).

You must not let the size of your congregation or the beauty of your place of worship deceive you. Massive congregations filled with apathetic spectators are not what our Lord intended. Wayne Jacobsen, in *A Passion For God's Presence*, illustrates Satan's plan to make the church big and impersonal:

In the third century Satan must have called a BIG meeting with his demons. Hades 1, he probably called it. Since persecution had failed so miserably, this diabolical council needed to develop a new strategy to undermine the life of the church...

The objectives were clear: The plan would have to diffuse the self-sacrificing love that carried the church through conflict, distract it from intimacy with God, and devalue the importance of the individual believ-

er... Someone came up with a very simple idea: 'Trying to keep it small hasn't worked—let's make it big!' What would happen if the church suddenly became acceptable? Many would come just for social reasons. They would quickly dilute those who are really in God's clutches.

And imagine all the programs and activities they would have to plan to keep those people happy. Nothing chokes out intimacy as well as busyness. The church would eventually become a machine, chewing up individuals instead of loving them.

They couldn't possibly teach all the followers to walk with God personally, so they would soon substitute rules and guidelines for His ever-present voice. The machine would have to be run by professionals. The others would become nothing more than spectators and billpayers.⁸

Whether or not such a demonic meeting actually occurred is debatable, but the deception of the demonic goal can readily be seen throughout the church today: "**Size equals success.**"

We were visiting friends in a large Florida city a few years ago. As they drove us around, our host pointed out different church buildings. Many were vacant. His tale sounded something like, "This one once had 5,000 in attendance... This one had 3,000... This one..." Each church we were shown had grown to tremendous size and then destroyed itself from within.

Soon after our visit to Florida, we were visiting other friends outside Washington, DC. As we drove down one of the main streets enroute to the Sunday morning worship service, our host remarked that this particular street

was listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. It contained more church buildings than any other street in the world!

As we drove along, Karl pointed out which congregations had split from others along that same thoroughfare. Interestingly, during the service we attended, a letter of reconciliation from the church leadership was read to the congregation. It was addressed to the congregation from which *they* had split some years earlier.

This state of affairs wouldn't be so serious if the two examples cited represented just a few isolated cases in the U.S. However, we are now talking about the rule, not the exception. Congregations have become *human institutions*, not *living spiritual organisms*.

Corroborating this thought is the following from Ernest Wright in *The Rule of God*:

God, through the work of the Spirit, has always been at war with human institutionalism, because the institution becomes idolatrous, self-perpetuating, and self-worshipping, because church membership becomes synonymous with the new birth, because man tries to make the Spirit follow law.

How complex we have made the simplicity of the gospel, with our programs, methods, organizations and a world of nervous activities which occupy time and attention but can never satisfy the longing of the heart. The **shallowness of our inner experience**, the **hollowness of our worship**, and that servile **imitation of the world** which marks our promotional methods all testify that we, in this day, know God only imperfectly, and the peace of God scarcely at all. (emphasis added)⁹

John Stott, a well-known Christian author, was asked to explain why Christianity has declined in the West, and how this process can be avoided as more and more of the world becomes Westernized. Stott replied,

It began with these philosophers who mounted a frontal attack on the Christian church, seeking to replace *revelation* with *reason*... And the church was feeble to capitulate to that assault... Another reason why Christianity is declining is that what is declining is *pseudo-Christianity*. It is not the authentic Christianity described in the Gospels and the New Testament...

Christianity has declined in the West because Christian people who claim to follow Christ *don't look like it*... If Christians lived like Jesus Christ, the world would be at our feet today. The greatest hindrance to the spread of the gospel is the church. The church that is intended to be a stepping stone to faith is more often a *stumbling block to faith*. (emphasis added)¹⁰

Probably the biggest reason for the church's difficulty in breaking its ties with people management systems and programs is *institutionalism*. An organized and recognized body called "the church" more often follows the pattern of corporate America than relying in obedient trust on the standard of God's Word and living as extended spiritual family.

Both Jesus and the early Church disregarded institutionalism, preferring the *power of the Spirit* and the *relationships among believers* for interpersonal ministry. It was obvious to them from the Hebrew

Scriptures and from the society around them that the institution of the priestly system had failed to produce an obedient people who loved and served the Lord.

Institutional efforts can appear "successful" even when the vitality of Jesus isn't real. That's what is so deceptive about it. You think you're pleasing God for all your activity and its results, yet beneath the programs and entertainment lies an emptiness that few will admit. Institutionalism deceives you into feeling good about yourself even after your *responsiveness to God* has ceased.

A dear friend of ours was teaching in England a few years ago when he asked the congregation this question: "If Jesus Christ were dead, how long would you keep on doing what you're doing here?" The people were convicted as they realized and admitted that *everything would go on just as it had*. The institution provided all that they needed or wanted to fulfill their social and religious needs.

"You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." So from that day on they plotted to take His life (John 11:50,53).

You may wonder why it's so hard for followers of Jesus in the US to get back to the relational intimacy and spiritual fruitfulness of the believers in the Book of Acts.

A hindrance that hampers restoration of intimacy with our Lord is "vested interest" in the religious establishment. Vested interests are found in those who, because of their position and power over others, strive to keep the status quo. They have no intention of encouraging change that would foster greater dependence on the Holy Spirit!

For example, while Mike was in the Navy he read a dramatic account of vested interest that required an Act of Congress to overcome. During the early 1900's, airplanes were introduced aboard certain military ships. The pilots were in control of the missions of their planes, independent of the direct decision-making of the ship's captain.

Throughout Naval history, a ship's captain had always exercised total dominion over everything that was aboard his vessel. Many captains perceived the pilots' autonomy as a threat to their own vested interest of *absolute authority*. A number of ship captains even tried to jeopardize the success of aircraft missions launched from their ships.

Some actually endangered pilots' lives by putting their ship into a turning maneuver just as a plane was attempting to land onboard. The subsequent crash would then prove the captain's point that planes had no business being on ships!

Therefore Congress stepped in and enacted a new law: Any ship with aircraft stationed onboard was required to have a captain who was also a qualified aviator. Today over half the people in the Navy are connected to aviation in some way. Once vested interests are exposed and challenged, changes can occur.

In *A Passion For God's Presence*, Wayne Jacobsen vividly exposes the power of vested interests in churches today. Jacobsen illustrates his point with the story of *The Emperor's New Clothes*. In this tale, a group of royal advisors seeks to keep their jobs by lying about the emperor's nudity. As the king parades through the town in his "new clothes," a little boy with no vested interest at stake shouts the obvious: "He's naked!"

Jacobsen correlates the fable with the history of the church:

It's easy for us now to look back at those generations, not sharing their vested interests, and see how *believers sold out* to political and personal corruption during the Middle Ages; to high finance prior to the Reformation; to terror and murder during the Inquisition; to natural reason during the Enlightenment; and to liberalism early in this century...

We stay captive to deception by the *same appeal of personal interest*... So it is with the church today: many people are *making Christianity just what they want it to be*, whatever fits their interest... It doesn't take great wisdom to unmask deceit—only a desire to look at things *the way they really are*, not the way we want to see them.¹¹(emphasis added)

A growing number of observers are now pointing to the institutionalized church in the United States and crying, "We're spiritually naked!"

A tale from *The New England Church Resource Handbook* further illustrates the concept of vested interests.

Henry Cabot Lodge, a [former] senator from Massachusetts, was convinced that many bureaucrats have little else on their minds than maintaining their power and position (a problem sometimes encountered in churches as well as government). "They are a lot like old Si Haskins," he said.

One day we came upon Si sitting on the dam up above the town. "What are you doing, Si?" we asked.

"I'm paid to shoot the muskrats," he replied. "They're diggin' under the dam."

‘Well, there’s one over there right now.’ We pointed to a big one with his eyes just above water. ‘Why don’t you shoot him?’

‘You don’t think I want to lose my job, do you?’ he replied.¹²

Many of the Pharisees of Israel were captive to their own vested interests. Numbers of people had put their faith in Jesus after He raised Lazarus from the dead.

Now think about how far the vested interest the religious establishment went to protect their positions: *“So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in Him”* (John 12:10,11).

Do you wonder if Lazarus, having been brought back to life, ever found out that the priests were planning to kill him? At what point does a vested interest so thoroughly blind a person who *thinks* he or she is doing God’s will from discerning the truth?

**“Do not go beyond what is written.’
Then you will not take pride in one man
over against another”** (1 Corinthians 4:6).

Revisionism. Does that word mean anything to you? Most people in congregations today are so subtly influenced by its effects that they don’t even notice. The *Random House Dictionary* defines revisionism as “attempting to reevaluate and restate the past based on newly acquired standards.” (emphasis added)¹³ In other words, historical truth is revised to suit what you *want* it to be rather than what it actually was.

Revisionism within the church has had a profound effect throughout the

centuries. Many today think that the customs, practices, even the organization of the church date from the time of Jesus and the apostles.

Yet, an extraordinary amount of revisionism has entered the church over the centuries. It’s no wonder so much of the vitality of the early Church has been lost!

History, however, shows that prejudice and vested interests over the course of time “revised” the way the early Church carried on. Subsequent believers were handed something far different than the “extended spiritual family” that was intended by our Lord. In fact, much of what you consider key elements of church practice may even violate 1 Corinthians 4:6, quoted earlier. We’ll explore these factors in lessons to follow.

Not even the Bible is safe from revisionism. One version contains a genderless God to accommodate the feminist movement. Another has modified verses that pertain to sin so that people can excuse their failure to repent yet still think of themselves as “Christian”.

Revisionism is a child of deceit. The Bible tells us, *“The great dragon was hurled down — that ancient serpent, called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him”* (Revelation 12:9). The deceiver has been at work since the Garden of Eden, and it’s no surprise that his work continues unabated.

Jesus tells us that lies are Satan’s native tongue: *“You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies”* (John 8:44).

“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11).

The opposite of revisionism is *apperception*, comparing new information with what you already know beyond doubt to be true. In other words, you evaluate a newer teaching or practice to see if it lines up with older, proven truths.

Jesus relied on apperception in His teachings by often *quoting* the Older Testament and then *applying that truth* to a situation He was addressing. For instance, while speaking in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read aloud the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (vv. 1,2).

His listeners already believed this prophecy to be true, so Jesus used these verses as the basis for understanding Himself, telling them, *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”* (Luke 4:16-21).

To justify His disciples plucking ears of corn on the Sabbath (see Matthew 12:1-8), Jesus reminded His critics of the commonly known fact of “sanctified Sabbath breaking”. David and his hungry troops had entered the tabernacle and eaten the consecrated bread that by law was relegated solely to the priests (see 1 Samuel 21:3-6).

Jesus went on to declare in apperception that on the Sabbath, the priests regu-

larly broke the commandment that demanded no work on that day in order to offer sacrifices and circumcise babies (see Matthew 12:5-7, from Hosea 6:6). His lesson for application? That *mercy* surpasses sanctimonious self-righteousness!

So important were the *Hebrew Scriptures as a basis for the Gospel message* that they were quoted for application, or *apperceived*, all throughout the gospels, epistles, and the Revelation.

The Bereans were commended for studying the Scriptures because they apperceived Paul’s new teachings in light of Hebraic scriptural truths (see Acts 17:11).

We’re writing with *apperception* in mind, trying to clearly discern God’s intent at the time the Scriptures were written so you will apply it to your life.

In order to be true to the Word of God, we must be willing to leave behind today’s church structure and traditions that may *seem* “sacred” yet have no biblical foundation. If we are honest with ourselves, the Christianity that revisionism and institutionalism have produced bears little of Christ’s image.

Pursue for yourself the nobleness of the Bereans. Investigate the Bible to *apply* what God has said. Like the Bereans, you may yearn to reach the point in your faith experience in which your practices *“do not go beyond what is written”* (see 1 Corinthians 4:6).

God is seeking those who long with the intensity of David to be touched by Him personally: *“O my Strength, I watch for you; you, O God, are my fortress, my loving God”* (Psalm 59:9,10).

Our Lord penetrates *hearts*, not programs. That’s what intimacy is all about, and that is what you are called to pass

on to others. You can't expect to impact prisoners of the spiritual forces of darkness throughout the world — or even your family, neighbors and coworkers — if you offer them a religious formula but withhold your heart.

The following poem addresses the resistance of so many to forsake that which has been so ineffective and harmful. As you appraise the loss of the Hebraic influence of the early Church, you may see in today's church the dominance of Greek philosophy. You'll recognize it if you believe the "spiritual" realm is far holier than the physical!

The Hebraic roots have also been supplanted by Roman organization, which insists on a hierarchy of church leadership in order to perpetuate the church system. Ask yourself, "*Is this what God wants?*" Have the reforms of the past centuries been able to reestablish the biblical Church that *Jesus* would build?

THE CLIFF

"Twas a dangerous cliff, as they freely confessed,
Though to walk near its crest was so pleasant;
But over its terrible edge there had slipped
A duke and full many a peasant.
The people said something would have to be done,
But their projects did not at all tally.
Some said, "Put a fence 'round the edge of the cliff,"
Some, "An ambulance down in the valley."

The lament of the crowd was profound and was loud,
As their hearts overflowed with their pity;
But the cry for the ambulance carried the day
As it spread through the neighboring city.
A collection was made to accumulate aid,

And the dwellers in highway and alley
Gave dollars or cents—not to furnish a fence—
But put an ambulance down in the valley.

"For the cliff is all right if you're careful," they said;

"And if folks ever slip and are dropping,
It isn't the slipping that hurts them so much
As the shock down below—when they're stopping."

So for years (we have heard), as these mishaps occurred,
Quick forth would the rescuers sally,
To pick up the victims who fell from the cliff
With the ambulance down in the valley.

Said one, to his plea, "It's a marvel to me
That you'd give so much greater attention
To repairing results than to curing the cause;
You had much better aim at prevention.
For the mischief, of course, should be stopped
at its source,
Come, neighbors and friends, let us rally.
It is far better sense to rely on a fence
Than an ambulance down in the valley."

"He is wrong in his head," the majority said;
"He would end all our earnest endeavor,
He's a man who would shirk this responsible work,
But we will support it forever.
Aren't we picking up all just as fast as they fall
And giving them care liberally?
A superfluous fence is of no consequence,
If the ambulance works in the valley."

The story looks queer as we've written it here,
But things oft occur that are stranger.
More humane, we assert, than to succor the hurt,
Is the plan of removing the danger.
The best possible course is to safeguard the source,
Attend to things rationally.
Yes, build up the fence, and let us dispense
With the ambulance down in the valley.

Author Unknown

Many of the past church reforms stemmed from Hellenist philosophical arguments over revisionist writings. You are experiencing the results of Hellenist intrusion even today: over 23,000

denominations that have been established over creedal divisions. Are these fragmentations all acceptable to God? Is yours?

Each disagreement and resulting division operates like the ambulance down in the valley. Today's creedal differences have distracted God's people from personal intimacy both with Jesus and with each other. Most congregations keep people occupied with programs and meetings but generally fail to lead them to the fullness of loving obedience in Christ.

In fact, church busyness often lures people away from intimacy. Instead of a source of edification and mutual support as extended spiritual family, "church life" is all too often a wellspring of pettiness, gossip, and manipulation.

It appears that there are two possible options open to followers of Jesus today: One, to continue to "effect repairs", *i.e.*, to put the ambulance down in the valley to pursue the mistakes of the past, struggling to patch up the church as it has been revised over the centuries.

If you use the same processes of reforming the church that your forefathers used, you will find yourself still clinging to non-biblical or extra-biblical forms and patterns that have, over time, become hallowed because of tradition.

Just possibly, this generation can be honest with itself and recognize that the whole edifice is crumbling. A new generation is rejecting empty form that lacks living substance.

Your second option is to accept the challenge of restoring the true biblical foundations of the early Church. If you understand that *Jesus* is the only Head and Builder of His Church, you need to search the Bible. Discover that which He and the apostles presented through the Hebraic framework in which it was initially addressed.

Those who are willing to do this can work together in agreement with the Holy Spirit and in our time see a true expression of the Church of Jesus Christ. Will it be popular? Probably not. Will it be powerful? Yes, exceedingly so!

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