

The Redemptive Society

God wants His people to believe “in” Jesus, not just “about” Him. As we reflect upon our own commitment to the Lord Jesus, we cannot help but wonder how much dedication there is on our part in the development of the redemptive society of God. Are we enthusiastic toward the redemptive fellowship of God? Is there loyalty on our part to the fellowship of the concerned? Is there allegiance to the weightier matters of God’s Word? Is there devotion to the teachings of God in our daily walk with Him? Is there loyalty to winning souls to Jesus? Is there faithfulness to meet with the saints weekly? Is there steadfastness to study the Word of God daily? What does the word commitment mean to us? Hopefully, commitment means assuming responsibility in our walk with God.

If we are responsible, then we are loyal, faithful, firm, steadfast, dependable, stable, and so on. If the kingdom of Christ on earth is to progress, we must of necessity be committed to Jesus as both Lord and God. But this dedication also involves genuine concern for the redemptive society ordained by God to operate in the ordinary society of humanity. We cannot shun the church, as many do, with impunity from God’s wrath. The church is a part of the fabric of God’s children. The church of Jesus is one of the external manifestations of His reign in the hearts of His people. It is through the church that evangelistic efforts are put forth in order to win the masses to Christianity. The gathered church is a company of committed saints to evangelize the lost and to encourage the saved.

GROWTH IN SPIRITUAL MATURITY: GOD’S FELLOWSHIP

Just a casual glance over our relationship with God quickly reveals that unless there is a relevant faith, that is to say, a faith that is active in spiritual activities associated with the people of God, then our faith will not survive. **We cannot live our lives in a vacuum from other believers.** Not only must faith be intellectual, it must also be a self-conscious faith that is exercised within a specific group of people, namely, God’s church or community of saints. In order for us to grow to maturity, we need the spirit and fellowship of other believers. **Our spiritual life cannot be maintained in isolation from God’s fellowship.**

Many individuals do not see the relevance of the church in the twenty-first century. The church frequently comes under attack from those within and from those without. Yet, in spite of all its shortcomings—blemishes, divisions, and failures—the church is still the best hope for spiritual strength. Even though today’s church lacks a lot in its role within society, life without the church would be much worse. Is the church a necessity in our lives? Has the church lost its saltiness? Is the church a light to the world? What does the church mean to us? Do we measure the success of the church by the crowds? Do we determine the victory of the church by how powerful the preacher is in his delivery of God’s Word? Do we gauge the triumph of the church

by its building program(s)? It is not uncommon for believers to forsake, or abandon, the assembly because the church does not always measure up to perfection in their eyes.

What is the church? Is it the building or the people? Do we place more emphasis upon the building of brick and mortar than we do upon the redemptive society created by God through Jesus Christ our Lord? In today's society, it is not uncommon for Christians to speak of the church as the building. Are we guilty of idolatry of the church building? It is not the building that matters, but rather, it is the real vitality manifested in the lives of God's people that really counts. Just a brief reflection upon the ancient religions in Greece reveals that even though the temples survived for a long time, the real strength of their religions had departed. We still witness this same phenomenon in many fellowships today. Christians go through their rituals of five acts on Sunday morning, but, at the same time, we witness that the genuine liveliness of the Christian life has deceased. They are no longer an active redemptive society of committed ones to Jesus Christ. They are no longer evangelists for the proclamation of Jesus as God's Good News of salvation.

We could say as Paul said to the Athenians: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22). Are we very religious? Are we keeping up an outward show of Christianity? Are we dead in our devotion to the things of God? With the Athenians, their religion died in spite of religious observances by its adherents in their temples. Why? One obvious reason is that it could not meet the test of social relevance and intellectual validity in the worship of their Gods. Men and women were still groaning under the burdens of sin and longing for some hitherto remedy that would be adequate to the wants of their entire nature.

On the other hand, Christianity conquered the heathen religions because of the new vitality and social relevance that stemmed from the life of Christ, along with His teachings and His Death, and His Resurrection from the grave. Without Christ there was/is no hope. Without Christ there was/is the sting of death. Without Christ there was/is no optimism for life beyond the grave. Through identification with Christ, we can say with excitement: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). Can we say this with the same gusto that Paul penned these words? Has Christ made a difference in our lives? If we are still groaning under the burden of sin, Jesus is the answer to all our problems.

ZEAL FOR GOD OR DULL CONFORMITY?

As we inspect our lives, we need to face the issues of zeal for the things of God or we need to face the attitude of dull conformity. Are we zealous for the things of God? Are we seeking first God's kingdom and His righteousness in our lives? Or are we seeking first our pleasures? One of the greatest dangers facing the church today is dull conformity. In other words, the Christian church is neither cold nor hot in its zeal for the salvation of souls or for good works that will bring glory and honor to God. We can say that the church, often times, is halfhearted in its level of concern for the things of God. Lukewarmness is not something new within the fellowship of God. Jesus, in His letter to the church located in Asia Minor (Laodicea), warned the church of its indifference to the things of God:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. ¹⁵ I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. ¹⁹ Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. ²⁰ Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. ²¹ To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²² He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Revelation 3:14-21)

As we transfer ourselves mentally back into the first century, how do we interpret this letter to Laodicea into the twenty-first century? We frequently fall into wishy-washy attitudes of negligence about the things of God because of the overwhelming pressures to conform to the status quo surrounding us in our walk with God. We become a part of certain segments of Christianity that no longer direct the patterns of life for fruitfulness. It is not uncommon for us to relinquish our responsibilities and to lose our individuality in Christian service.

THE CHURCH: INSTITUTIONALISM OR ORGANISM?

Many Christians, so it seems, think that if they meet on Sunday morning for the gathering of the saints, then they have completed their duty to God for the week. Numerous Christians have forgotten that they are ministers of reconciliation, not just the pulpit minister. Numerous Christians hand over their Christian duties to a select few. Creg Ogden correctly analyzes the modern day church: "The experience of worship in an institutional framework is something done to you, in front of you, or for you, but not by you."¹ As a whole, at least for many Christians, the church has lost its sense of missions—salt and light in a decaying world.

It appears that today's church has accommodated herself to the cultural climate of the fifteenth century of priest and clergy of a select few. In other words, the church is no longer changing society, but it is being changed by the current culture of the modern church. The church needs to move from the concept of the church as an institution to the concept of the church as an organism. Again, Ogden is on target when he writes that there is a need for revamping our concept of the church from an organization to the church as an organism.² He expresses his thoughts about the upside down view of the church with clarity. He cogently calls attention to the reversed view of the church as wreaking havoc within the Christian concept of outreach. He again writes with insight as he calls attention to the problem that the modern day church faces: "The ministry of the church defined from the top-down viewpoint of its official leaders as opposed to the bottom-up perspective of God's people."³ In other words, Ogden

¹ Creg Ogden, *The New Reformation: Returning the Ministry to the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 24.

² *Ibid.*, 29-44.

³ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

accurately points out that the church today is, in one sense, an institution that has been institutionalized.

According to Robert Raines (ordained minister in the United Church of Christ) the modern church is seeking to enable people to live with resolution in a world without resolution, that is to say, purpose without purpose.⁴ Just what does he mean by “purpose without purpose”? It appears that he is saying that Christians as a whole are just spectators on Sunday mornings—that’s all. The average fellowship has little sense of individual mission in the world as ministers of God. Ministry is left for just a few select individuals known as priests, reverends, clergymen, or preachers. If someone were to ask us if we are members of a “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9), how would we respond? Would we say, “I am a member of the Baptist Church”? Or would we say, “I am a member of the Church of Christ”? Or would we say, “I am a member of Tom Jones’ Church”? Do we really understand that we belong to the chosen people? Do we comprehend that we are a part of the royal priesthood? As members of this “chosen people,” do we grasp that we belong to a holy nation? Have we lost our sense of urgency for the salvation of men and women?

Do we really believe the words of Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount as He speaks about salt and light concerning His disciples? Listen once more to His penetrating words about His people and His society:

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. ¹⁴“**You are the light of the world.** A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16)

We must not shrink from personal witnessing. God wants His people to bear fruit. As we reflect upon the Sermon on the Mount, we cannot help but recall the words of Jesus to the Twelve: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last” (John 15:16). Even though these words were spoken to the Twelve, God expects us to bear fruit. Just as the twelve Apostles were chosen, so God has chosen us who respond to the Good News to bear fruit to His glory (Ephesians 2:8-10). We, as Christians, are to live lives worthy of God’s calling (4:1-3). To some extent, it appears that the church, as a whole, has lost its sense of vocation. We are called to be agents of reconciliation. Paul expresses this concept of ministry in his second letter to Corinth: “And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Even though Paul speaks of himself and his co-workers in this context, yet all Christians are to proclaim the Gospel message.

⁴ See Robert A. Raines, “The Loss of Mission,” in his book *New Life in the Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 13-19. I am deeply indebted for his insight concerning the need for a renewal of restoration of Jesus’ mission to the world. One cannot read this book without a consciousness of Elton Trueblood’s book on *The Company of the Committed*. In fact, it was Trueblood who suggested and encouraged Raines to write his book on *New Life in the Church*.

The idea of outreach is commonly assigned to the so-called pulpit minister. Through the lens of the institution, we observe two ministries—clergy and laity. Church signs and church bulletins betray this dichotomy—“reverend,” “The Very Reverend,” “The Most Reverend,” and so on. It is not uncommon for churches to give titles to their pulpit ministers in order to set them apart from the laity, or secular members of the congregation. On the other hand, if Christians are ministers of reconciliation, then there needs to be a revamping of the concept of ministry. It is in this vein that Raines says, “We lose our individual concern in corporate irresponsibility.”⁵ Because of this upside down view of the church, many Christians do not become involved.

Within the congregation there is the “segregation of concern” for ministry. Even though there are different gifts exercised within the Christian ministry, all Christians are ministers. Every Christian is called of God to be a faithful priest (1 Peter 2:9). Again, do we have a sense of mission to the lost? If we are going to reach out to the lost, there must be a change in us. Yes, there must be a change in our ethical behavior. Are we really and truly conscious that we are a “new creation” in Christ Jesus? New life has come to every believer “in” and “through” Christ. In the traditional church, Christians are released from the bondage of sin to life in Christ without a mission. If there is to be a renewal of mission, there must be a real change in our concept of Christianity—involvement.

BURNING ZEAL FOR SPIRITUAL THINGS

We are willing to accept Christianity, provided that it does not demand zeal for the kingdom of God and His righteousness. With many of us, there is softness about our faith, that is to say, there is no intense burning zeal for spiritual things. How do we compare our own lives to the lives of those in the church in Laodicea? Are we “hot” or “cold” in our relationship with God? Do we feel as Jeremiah did in speaking about the things of God? He could not keep his mouth shut. Listen to the prophet as he pours out the inner most thoughts of his soul: “But if I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’ his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot” (Jeremiah 9:20).

Do we feel this way? What are our religious convictions? How do we think about Christianity? Do we support the kingdom of God financially with a determined outreach to the lost? Do we provide for the work of God with our money? Do we spend more on dog food than we give to the cause of Christ? Do we spend more on fishing that we give to the cause of Christ? Do we tip the waitress or waiters more than we give to the cause of Christ? Has the Gospel of God revolutionized our way of life?

TRUE WORSHIP

Are we involved in promoting God’s kingdom? Are we worshipers of the One true God? What is worship? What is our concept of worship? Is worship something that we just do on Sunday mornings? Or is worship our way of life twenty-four hours a day? Elton Trueblood’s

⁵ Ibid., 15.

(1900-1994), American Quaker author, educator, philosopher, and theologian, words are vivid and to the point as he seeks to call attention to the true concept of worship:

The paradox of the apparent victory, yet real defeat, of the contemporary Church is nowhere more vividly demonstrated than in the present concentration upon *attendance*. Great billboard advertisements appear by the hundreds with a single message, “Worship Together This Week.” This fact that the donors of the advertisements are undoubtedly motivated by goodwill toward the life of religion, as they understand it, does not obscure the fundamental ineptitude of their effort. Obviously, the sponsors of the advertisements look upon attendance at a religious assembly as the major religious act or the major evidence of church membership. It is no wonder that they think this, if they observe the frantic and sometimes ingenious efforts of pastors, week by week, to surpass all previous records of attendance. The promotional purpose of the local church newsletters is transparent.⁶

It is not uncommon for us, as Christians, to identify the whole of our worship with what we do on Sunday morning during the assembling of the saints. For many, worship starts at a certain hour and ends at a certain hour. Yes, we should assemble with God’s people on Sundays. Because we are worshipers of God, we meet with the saints, which is an external sign of our worship. When we assemble with God’s people, this activity is a part of our worship, not the worship. Assembling with God’s “chosen people” is a part of our worship, or devotion, to God. It is a part of our way of life. When we present our bodies as living sacrifices to God, we want to meet with God’s “chosen people” on Sundays or, for that matter, during the week. We will adopt the custom of Jesus in His attendance at the synagogues on the Sabbath. Luke’s comments about this incident of Jesus are filled with awe, wonder, and devotion on the part of Jesus as He fulfills His mission for lost humanity. Listen to Luke as he lets his reader, Theophilus, see Jesus’ comments about His being the fulfillment of the words of Isaiah (739 BC):

He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and **on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom**. And he stood up to read.¹⁷ The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed,¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”^a²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him,²¹ and he began by saying to them, **“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”** (Luke 4:15-21)

PURPOSE OF ASSEMBLING

This concept of assembling with God’s people raises a question: Why do we assemble? Is it to perform a worship service? No! We assemble because we are already worshippers of the One true God. Since worship is the presenting of our bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1), then we assemble with the company of the redeemed in order to encourage one another in the

⁶Elton Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961), 18-19.

^aIsaiah 61:1, 2

faith. This chapter is not denying that singing and praying are not acts of worship. But this chapter does deny that God has ordained a worship service with five-ritualistic acts that have to be performed on Sunday morning for our corporate worship to be in Spirit and Truth. Nevertheless, the traditional concept of worship among many godly and devout people—five rituals performed on Sunday morning—is not the true conception, or model, of worship as presented by Paul. Our proper understanding of worship will go a long way in helping us to eliminate many divisions within the Christian Community founded by Christ.⁷ It is not uncommon for Christians to speak of going to worship, but this concept is not really accurate. The Church is not something you go to; it is the Church, or Temple, that does the going. Christians constitute the Temple of God (see 1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Trueblood captures this sense when he writes:

The difference is fundamental and far-reaching. We can go to a railroad station or to a motion picture theater or to a ball game; but a church is something which demands a wholly different human relationship, the relationship of belonging. If a man is really in—really belongs to—a church, he is just as much a member of it when he sits at his desk in his business house as when he sits in a pew at his meetinghouse. The point is that the relationship, if real, is continuous, regardless of time and place and performance.⁸

Again, we must analyze our concept of Christianity. Is Christianity simply a matter of attendance at a performance or just entertainment? We gather in order to strengthen and encourage one another in our daily walk with God (Hebrews 10:24-25). This gathering results from our worship as our way of life. It seems that many Christians have turned Christianity into just another religion—religious rituals performed on Sunday morning to appease a wrathful God. Jesus did not come to give us another religion. He came to give us eternal life. As a result of the wrong perception of worship, we detect the spiritual erosion of love within the company of the redeemed. We fight like cats and dogs over a so-called worship service. Divisions, as a whole, hinge on the so-called proper concept of religion, that is to say, its correction of interpretation over a system of beliefs. Without an adequate concept of the Christian *ekklesia*, there will never be a return to the priesthood of all believers. Again, Trueblood goes right to the heart of the matter when he pens:

The crucial question today is not whether we must have a fellowship, for on that point we are reasonably clear; the crucial question concerns the *character* of the fellowship. The more we think about it the more we realize that it must be a fellowship of the committed. This is because mere belief is not enough.⁹

COMMITMENT TO CHRIST

⁷See Dallas Burdette, “Congregational Worship and Division,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon, 2008), 171-180.

⁸Elton Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961), 19.

⁹*Ibid.*, 21.

We come together simply because we are a fellowship of the committed. It is not uncommon for us to take the position that we do not need to belong or participate in the company of the redeemed. Some believers treat Sunday as a day for fishing, visiting relatives, going to the lake, and so on. What does Sunday mean to us? Is it a day that we look forward to? Is it a day with which we anticipate hearing the Word of God expounded? Is it a day in which we eagerly long to meet around the Lord's Table to remember the One who died that we might live for Him? Do we crucify the Son of God afresh by our outward behavior? We cannot be effective in God's kingdom with anything less than commitment, but this loyalty of affection for the things of God will not be effective without obligation to the company of the resurrected ones.

The difference between the Christian and the non-Christian is the object of commitment. For us, as believers, we vow our allegiance to Jesus as Lord. As Christians, we not only believe *that* He was, but we also believe *in* Him. It is the height of folly and arrogance for us to think that we can live in isolation from the company of the redeemed. In the first century, many Christians had begun to withdraw from the local gathering of the saints, especially in the face of persecution. Let the words of the author of the Book of Hebrews dig deep into our souls as we, too, grapple with the significance of the Sunday gatherings:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. ²⁵ Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:23-25)

“The Day approaching” had to do with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Yet, in spite of persecution, they were told not to abandon, or ditch, this gathering of the saints. Self-sufficiency is not the hallmark of a Christian. We, as saints of God, are ever conscious that we are weak and frail and sinful in our daily walk with Him. Once more, the author of the Book of Hebrews instructs the company of the unswerving saints to encourage one another:

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. ¹⁴ We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. (Hebrews 3:12-14)

What does commitment mean to us? Did we pick up on the distinction between *that* and *in*? Belief *in* Christ is different from belief *that*. Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), French philosopher and a leading Christian existentialist, explains the distinction this way:

The verb *to believe* is commonly used in an extremely vague and fluctuating way. It can simply mean, ‘I presume’ or ‘it seems to me’. In that context *to believe* appears as something much weaker and more uncertain than to be convinced. But in our domain, if we are to reach a greater precision of thought, we shall have to concentrate our attention not on the fact of *believing that* but on that of *believing in*. . . . If I believe in something, it means that I place myself at the disposal of something, or

again that I pledge myself fundamentally, and this pledge affects not only *what I have* but also *what I am*.¹⁰

Have we placed ourselves at the disposal of Jesus? Have we made a pledge of commitment? Has our promise of devotion altered our interest? Has it affected our money? Has it changed our ethical behavior? Has it revolutionized our Sunday habits? Do we know *about* Him or do we *know* Him? Is there a distinction between believing something and believing in something? Do we believe *something* about Jesus or do we believe *in* Jesus as our Lord and Savior? Is there loyalty on our part? Once more, Trueblood captures the very kernel of loyalty when he writes: “To be committed is to believe *in*. Commitment, which includes belief but far transcends it, is determination of the total self to act upon conviction.”¹¹ Jesus speaks frankly and forcefully to the lawyer who wanted to know what the greatest commandment in the Law is:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’^a ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’^b ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:37-40).

We, as Christians, believe not only *that* He was, but we also believe *in Him* with all of our **hearts**, with all of our **souls**, and with all our **minds**. We are either with Jesus or we are against Him. There is no middle road. Are we committed to Jesus? Are we dedicated to His redemptive society, a society known as the Church? Do we realize that Jesus purchased the redemptive community with His own blood? Again, Luke preserves a part of Paul’s warning to the elders at Ephesus concerning their responsibilities within the Christian fellowship. He records Paul’s final admonition, which admonition should cause each of us to reflect upon the importance of God’s new humanity:

Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. ²⁶ Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. ²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.^a Be shepherds of the church of God,^b which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. ³² Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. (Acts 20:25-32)

¹⁰Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: Faith & Reality*, vol., 2 (New York: University Press of America, [1951], 1979), 77.

¹¹Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed*, 22.

a Deut. 6:5

b Lev. 19:18

^a Traditionally *bishops*

^b Many manuscripts *of the Lord*

What does the church of God's Anointed One mean to us? How do we act in response to the following question: What kind of a church would this church be if all the members were just like me? What kind of a church would this church be if all the members were just like me in gathering with the saints on Sundays? What kind of a church would this church be if all the members were just like me in the study of God's written Revelation? What kind of a church would this church be if all the members were just like me in my financial support? Are we simply members who are filled with dead bones? What is the status of the local church that we are a part of? Are we more concerned about the traditions of the church than we are about the redemptive society of God? Are we more committed to traditions that we are to the saving of souls?

Unfortunately, many churches are museums filled with dead bones, that is to say, the hand-me-down traditions of the fathers. For many fellowships, our salvation is dependent upon thinking correctly about our inherited traditions. It is not uncommon for some Christians with this mindset to talk about the Bible for hours, and yet, the very heart of Christianity is not the dominant and abiding motive of their lives. Large numbers of Christians know a lot about theology, but little about the very essence of Christianity, namely, Jesus. God's new community is more than correct thinking, even about God. It is in this vein that Paul addresses the Corinthians. In the Corinthian Church, this body of believers had diversity in their understanding of the one true God. Paul goes to the very heart of what God is interested in:

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge.^a Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ² The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But the man who loves God is known by God." (1 Corinthians 8:1-3)

We, as believers, need to recapture the heart of God's Gospel. We must bring back the true meaning of God's redemptive society, which understanding should generate commitment from every believer to advance God's kingdom. What is Christianity all about? We can say that God is more concerned about whether we love Him or not than He is about correct opinions on every subject. The traditional concept of worship has divided the redemptive society into many militaristic factions. The Bible teachers that there is "one faith," but nowhere does it teach that there is "one opinion." It goes almost without saying, "We can no more think alike on every subject than we can all look alike." In this same Scripture, Paul writes about the "one God," but, at the same time, he calls attention to the reality of his culture that not everyone knows this, that is, there is only one God (8:7).

As we reflect upon the essence of Christianity, we come to the realization that we need something else besides absolute knowledge of Holy Scripture if we are to introduce meaning and order into our relationship with God and with one another. The thing needed is Jesus. I grew up in a movement that relied heavily upon accurate interpretation of all issues as necessary for salvation. The so-called wisdom of this movement gave its members an occasion to be proud of its own achievements and assurance of salvation if they remained faithful to the traditions as expounded by their unique fellowship.

^a Or "*We all possess knowledge,*" as you say

Regrettably, God’s grace was never proclaimed from the pulpits. This movement, as a whole, never understood that the message of hope for humanity is Jesus. Our citation of the Scriptures taken out of context to maintain the *status quo*, or existing conditions, defeats the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is in this same frame of mind, or attitude, that Jesus confronted the religious leaders’ traditions, which were at least two hundred years old at the time of God’s Incarnation. Jesus not only began His ministry with comments about the religious leaders (Matthew 5:20), but He also ended His ministry with His castigation of their hypocrisy:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean.²⁸ In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. (23:27-28)

CONCLUSION

This chapter is designed to call attention to the true nature of the Church and its mission with an emphasis upon the redemptive society and its commitment to the proclamation of the Good News of God’s Way of salvation by faith “in” and “through” Jesus. The Church is not a school of people who simply holds to correct doctrines according to a select group of leaders. Christianity is a revelation from God in certain concrete facts—the Death, the Burial, and the Resurrection of Jesus. It is the message of the Cross of Jesus that goes right to the heart of the ills of the Christian community. Biblical faith is more than assents to certain customs handed down by the members of the clergy; it is devotion of the heart to God’s grace “in” and “through” Jesus. Paul captures the central point of Christianity this way: “**Remember** Jesus Christ, **raised** from the dead, **descended** from David. This is my gospel” (2 Timothy 2:8). Again, Paul summarizes the core of the Gospel this way:

Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He^c appeared in a body,^d was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory. (1 Timothy 3:16)

Providentially for us, God has not made our salvation dependent upon our intellectual attainments. Many believers have gone astray because they have turned inward upon their own knowledge of the Scriptures for salvation rather than upon Jesus. In other words, many are relying upon salvation based upon their accurate interpretation of Scripture instead of the finished work of Christ upon Calvary. Remember, God comes to us “in” and “through” Jesus Christ. Religion is not an academic exercise. In spite of our intellectual attainments, we must always be careful that we do not assume our own infallibility. Knowledge is only to be repudiated when it becomes our means of salvation. We need to refashion our hearts so that we no longer point to ourselves, but to God. We must also be careful to remember that the pathway

^c Some manuscripts *God*

^d Or *in the flesh*

leading to truth is paved with many preconceived ideas, that is to say, prejudices. Christianity demands commitment to Jesus.

Even if we wish to deny God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, we still cannot escape the consciousness of a Supreme Being, working through His redemptive society to bring about reconciliation to Himself. We may deny Him, but, at the same time, we cannot escape Him. Jesus has done something to human history—God entered time and space. We either know Jesus as a stone of stumbling or as a stone that is Head of the Corner. It is a historic fact that God has spoken to us through His Son. The Church needs to recapture the Gospel of God and reject traditions as equal to the Word of God. In the Gospel of God, we observe that righteousness and grace are fused together in the concrete fact of Calvary. The Cross is something actual; it is holy love Incarnate. At Calvary, we see the enormity of our sin in all of its rebellion against the Creator of the universe. In the Cross of Jesus, we witness the very lowest point of moral evil. It is the Gospel that moves the world, not the traditions of the Church. It is the redemptive society that carries forward this message of salvation.

If we wish to capture the world for Christ, we must be captivated, or enthralled, in amazement and struck with astonishment and driven to bow in worship of God's matchless love for us. Has our faith penetrated our hearts? Is our faith simply lodged in our intellectual understanding of Scripture? We must speak out against a stiff denominational system of ecclesiastical control over the minds of God's people. Within the various denominations, we discover that doctrines are often frozen in time—that is to say, frozen in terms that deny liberty of interpretation.

If we do not speak the language of a particular sectarian group or understand their thoughts, we are often charged with heresy. Many believers still make uniformity of doctrine the basis of fellowship within God's family. If the Church is to cease to be the most segregated institution in the World, it must recapture the very heart of God's Good News for a lost and dying world. In other words, salvation is not by works but by faith in Jesus Christ alone. God invites men and women to share in His glorious kingdom "in" and "through" Jesus. If we consider our traditions more important than Jesus Christ and His message of salvation, then we are on the wrong track. Is our particular church "full of dead men's bones"? How do we regard the church in our every day-to-day activities? Is it a dynamic part of our lives?