

# *My Pilgrimage of Faith*

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Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen. (2 Peter 3:18)

Initially, my pilgrimage of faith may be described as “Gullible’s Travels,” not Gulliver’s Travels. I accepted what I was taught without question. I memorized verses from the Bible by the hundreds. In the early stages of my ministry, I did not understand that one might cite Scripture and, at the same time, fail to apply the text correctly in light of its historical or cultural background. In the beginning of my spiritual leadership, as preacher and teacher,<sup>2</sup> my instructor taught me to commit to memory Holy Writ, not to analyze its context.<sup>3</sup> My first sermon,<sup>4</sup> “What

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<sup>1</sup> I was born July 4, 1934. I have been a serious student, teacher, and preacher of the Bible for just a little over sixty-eight years, supporting myself for many years as an agent for AFLAC. I have written numerous articles for religious journals, as well as many essays and sermons which are available on my website ([www.freedominchrist.net](http://www.freedominchrist.net)). **Daniel Rogers completely revamped this site in January 2021. I highly recommend his website: labornotinvain.com.** I am also the author of thirteen books. Within my ministry, I developed a keen interest in promoting unity among God’s people through a more accurate reading of the Word of God. I hold the B.A., M.S., and M.Div. degrees from Amridge University (formerly Southern Christian University), and I hold the Doctor of Ministry degree (1999) from Erskine Theological Seminary. Also, I was the Director of Extended Learning with Amridge University for about five years.

<sup>2</sup> I started my public ministry on January 28, 1951 in LaGrange, Georgia under the leadership of E.H. Miller (1909-1989), my uncle. **This essay was originally written in 2008. See Dallas Burdette, “Dallas Burdette’s Pilgrimage of Faith,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Mainland, Florida: Xulon Press, 2008), 1-26. The origin of this study came about as a request from James Albert who wanted me to write about my own spiritual journey within the one-cup fellowship.**

<sup>3</sup> This was not intentional on the part of the one who taught me. This godly man devoted his whole life to God with immense zeal. I still thank God for his instilling into me a belief in the trustworthiness of the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God. He was a child of his culture, as we all are. He taught me as he himself

Shall I Preach?” was the dawning of my dogmatic, partisan, factional, biased, and sectarian views concerning other believers. Even though I quoted the Word of God verbatim; nevertheless, my application of the Word was not in harmony with the context.

If anyone disagreed with my exposition of the Old and New Testament writings, he or she was anathema. In other words, for one to depart from my so-called mental sharpness, or understanding, meant that one did not have a clear insight into the truths of God, so I thought. I labored under the impression that I knew all the answers about the supposed prescribed five acts of a ritual worship service. I also struggled under the impression that fellowship could not be extended to those outside our four walls. As a result of this mindset, I identified my particular odd fellowship with the “true” church of Jesus Christ. As a result of this frame of mind, I excluded all other believers from belonging to Jesus. Unfortunately, I did not know that there is a difference between reading a text and seeing what is in the text. The following words of Michael Heiser<sup>5</sup> are extremely important for every Christian who wants to see what the text is saying. In his course on “Introducing Biblical Interpretation: Contexts and Resources,” he calls attention to the **necessity of seeing** and **not just reading** a text, which I had not learned in the early years of my ministry:

Now, as I see it, my task is really threefold. I want to alert you in this course to a number of obstacles that all interpreters face. There is a reason why Bible interpretation is difficult and why there’s so much disagreement. I want to also introduce you to what’s in the biblical text. Now, you might think, “Well, I know what’s in the biblical text because I can read it. I read my Bible.” Well, I think you’ll agree in pretty short order as we get into this course that reading is not *seeing*. I want to try to train your eye to *see* things in the text, to sort of slow down and think about what it is your eye is scanning when you read. Bible study, Bible research is a lot more than Bible reading.<sup>6</sup>

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had been taught. Because of different circumstances in life, I was exposed to other writers who helped me to develop principles of interpretation to which he had not been exposed.

<sup>4</sup> My first sermon (“What Should I Preach?”) was delivered at the chapel service of Montgomery Bible College, now Faulkner University, Montgomery, Alabama in 1950 (I do not remember the exact date.), but, on January 28, 1951, I delivered this same sermon at the Murphy Ave. Church of Christ in LaGrange, Georgia. Unfortunately, the Scriptures I cited were taken out of context. When I learned about CONTEXT, I had to reevaluate what I had been taught by godly men. This change eventually led to my expulsion from this unique or odd fellowship of God’s people.

<sup>5</sup> **Dr. Michael S. Heiser** is a Scholar-in-Residence for Faithlife Corporation, the makers of Logos Bible Software. His varied academic background enables him to operate in the realm of critical scholarship and the wider Christian community. His experience in teaching at the undergraduate level and writing for the layperson both directly contribute to Logos’ goal of adapting scholarly tools for nonspecialists. Dr. Heiser earned his PhD in Hebrew Bible and Semitic languages and holds an MA in ancient history and Hebrew studies. He is the coeditor of *Old Testament Greek Pseudepigrapha with Morphology* and *Semitic Inscriptions: Analyzed Texts and English Translations*, and can do translation work in roughly a dozen ancient languages, including Biblical Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, Egyptian hieroglyphs, and Ugaritic cuneiform. He also specializes in Israelite religion (especially Israel’s divine council), contextualizing biblical theology with Israelite and ancient Near Eastern religion, Jewish binitarianism, biblical languages, ancient Semitic languages, textual criticism, comparative philology, and Second Temple period Jewish literature. In addition, he was named the 2007 Pacific Northwest Regional Scholar by the Society of Biblical Literature.

<sup>6</sup> Michael S. Heiser, ed, “Segment 1: Obstacles to Interpretation,” *BI101 Introducing Biblical Interpretation: Contexts and Resources* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013).

One objective in writing about “My Pilgrimage of Faith” is to help individuals see the text as well as to read the text with comprehension. In order to describe my pilgrimage of faith, it is necessary to discuss the inner workings of my mind as I endeavored to walk in the ways of God. To do this, I will probe certain areas to give emphasis to my reasoning that led me out of my sectarian spirit. In my earlier ministry, I went to the Scriptures to prove what I already believed, but eventually, as a result of further studies, I went to the Word to see what it taught. This intense study is what got me into trouble with the one-cup and non-Sunday school fellowship that I associated with in the early stages of my ministry (1951-1968).

My downfall in this movement resulted from my acceptance of M. S. Whitehead—a believer in individual cups and Sunday school/Sunday morning Bible study. He did not make a so-called confession of error. Therefore, he was still a child of hell according to the one-cup fellowship. In spite of the negative criticism, he remained in the one-cup fellowship in Montgomery, AL until his death. As a result of my action, E. H. Miller (1909-1989), my uncle, sent letters to the one-cup churches, which letters brought about my dismissal from the one-cup movement. Even though we (the Vonora Ave. Church of Christ) continued to use one cup and did not adopt the practice of Sunday school prior to the so-called worship service, nevertheless, we were told that that was not sufficient. According to my uncle, we had to know that individuals would go to “hell,” that is to say that God had prepared a torture chamber in which He would burn them in a lake of fire forever and forever—no cessation from pain/agonies. In other words, if we expressed praise to God any other way than the way the one-cup movement practiced, God was going to get us for rebellion.

As a young boy, I listened to the Lone-Ranger and Tonto with excitement. **Tonto**, whose name means “dimwit,” seldom spoke, except for his meaningless phrase “*kemo sabe*.” He was seen as a projection of his white leader, and the **Lone-Ranger** never seemed to take the time to listen to him. Today, there is still a type of the Lone-Ranger mentality with the teacher and his student within the one-cup fellowship of God’s people. The teacher never takes time to listen to his “Tonto.” **Tonto only projects his Bible teacher.** Bible study is often done by the Lone-Ranger, even in private, in the same sort of meaningless company with Tonto. **Tonto** (student) looks to the **Lone-Ranger** (teacher), his hero of the faith, for the correct interpretation of the Scripture without questioning. To question is abomination. When I interrogated the *status quo*, the wrath of the one-cup and non-Sunday school fellowship dealt me a heavy blow; I was thrown out of the synagogue as an apostate.<sup>7</sup>

I was so accustomed to reading the Bible as I had been taught by generations of interpreters that for me to question the traditional interpretations was tantamount to questioning the Word of God itself. The tendency, on my part, was to identify what Scripture said with what I had been taught. This identification was one of the main obstacles that I encountered in trying to liberate the Bible from its traditions. **In my early ministry, I confused a tradition of explanation with the text itself.** I had to learn to reevaluate and reinterpret what had been

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<sup>7</sup> For an excellent study on the lone-ranger philosophy of Bible study, see Justo L. Gonzalez and Catherine G. Gonzalez, *Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 48-68.

handed down to me.<sup>8</sup> When I was about sixteen years old, the “faith of the fathers” became the watchword of orthodoxy for me. Their interpretation became normative and was passed on as authoritative. For me, the Christian Scriptures had been turned into another law, a law that was more stringent and more damning than even the first Law set forth by Moses.

One of the most difficult obstacles in my pilgrimage of faith was to approach the text without my strong personal biases.<sup>9</sup> I studied the Bible, for many years, with “colored glasses,” which led to distortion. I tended to give preconceived beliefs the same authority that I gave to the Bible. In other words, my preconceived authority was equal to that of the Scriptures. My own personal journey of faith made it very difficult for me to view the Scriptures without prejudice. My understanding and interpretation made it difficult to sift out the truths of God in dealing with the text. I allowed the context of my culture to control the context of the Bible. It became necessary for me to exercise a self-critical stance toward the tendency to impose my own agenda upon the interpretation of Scripture. I am still conscious of how difficult it is to block out a person’s cultural heritage in interpreting the ancient text. The Scriptures that I cited to justify my position were taken out of context. In my initial seventeen years in this fellowship of God’s people, I never, not even once, heard the word **context**. If we are going to approach any text of Scripture, we need to try to understand the author’s intent, not just our inherited

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<sup>8</sup> **When we exercise this prerogative of discernment, we must be prepared for the wrath of the ecclesiastical party and its preachers to wreak havoc on our bodies and mind.** In my own personal journey of faith, I was thrown out of the Synagogue overnight. It was as if I no longer existed. Letters were sent out to alert Christians that I was no longer “sound” in the faith, even though I was still a part of the one-cup and non-Sunday school faction. Relatives and friends no longer considered me faithful since I could not support the sectarian attitude manifested by the one-cup and non-Sunday school philosophy. Not one of the so-called faithful preachers contacted me to see why I changed my views on fellowship. **When I applied Romans 14 and 15, along with 1 Corinthians 8, I was castigated, or hauled over the coals.** I remember sharing 1 Corinthians 8 with one of my first cousins (Alton Bailey, 1932-2014). After paraphrasing 8:1-3, he responded by denying that that statement was in the Bible, even though he had read that Scripture hundreds of times. He had eyes to see, but he could not see; he had ears to hear, but he could not hear. Why? His traditions did not allow him free access to the Word of God. His preconceived ideas did not allow him to approach the Bible without his spectacles. Having said this, Alton was a sincere and godly man. He, like the rest of us, did not have perfect knowledge of God’s Word. Nevertheless, God knew this man’s heart. Remember, Paul wrote: **“But the man who loves God is known by God”** (1 Corinthians 8:3).

<sup>9</sup> Because of my earlier training, I found it difficult to deal with a number of Scriptures in context. I struggled to find answers in harmony with the whole of God’s Word. Since this essay is about my pilgrimage of faith, it is necessary that I quote from those who helped me the most in my study of the Scriptures. I am thankful to M. S. Whitehead for the many papers that he mailed to me concerning many of the issues that I struggled with for such a long, long time. I am also grateful to Whitehead for introducing me to the writings of Carl Ketcherside (1908-1989) and Leroy Garrett (1918-2015).

But even prior to the introduction to these various authors, I was very fortunate to have had some guidance from Ervin Waters (1918-2015) in the field of hermeneutics (science of interpretation). **As a result of his assistance, I became aware of many problems in my handling of the Scriptures.** The books recommended by Waters prepared me to digest the writing of M. S. Whitehead (I conducted the funeral service for Whitehead), Carl Ketcherside (1908-1989), Leroy Garrett (1918-2015), F.L. Lemley, and Alexander Campbell (1788-1866). I met Whitehead for the first time in the late fifties at the Lowery Church of Christ (one-cup and non-Sunday school), where I preached on a regular basis (at least once a month), while he was attending a Gospel meeting conducted by J. D. Philips (1904-1981).

interpretation handed down from generation to generation. The following citation from Christopher Wright<sup>10</sup> is on target:

An author-centered approach believes that the best way to find the meaning of the text is to ask the question: ‘What did the author mean to say?’—in the past tense, in his context, when he or she wrote it. That is, fundamentally, the task of exegesis. You are seeking, as far as possible, to discover the author’s intent in the text.<sup>11</sup>

Hopefully, this record of my own personal journey, with its struggles and heartaches, will give others encouragement to reexamine their own traditions in the light of the context of Scripture. Christians should never forget that their own journey occurs within a vast architecture of preunderstanding—no thinking takes place in a vacuum. I was so used to reading the Scriptures as my uncle had taught me that any questioning of his interpretation amounted to questioning the Scriptures. The hand-me-down interpretations made it almost impossible to read the Bible accurately. I had to learn to reassess and reinterpret what my uncle and other godly men passed on to me.

### WE SPEAK WHERE THE BIBLE SPEAKS

If it is not necessary for the interpreter to lay aside his own preliminary understanding of the subject matter of the text, have we not succumbed yet again to the tendency of Christian scholars right through history to read the New Testament through their own doctrinal spectacles? There are important safeguards against this threat, but no guarantees that it will be avoided. The first is that the interpreter who is aware of the danger is more likely to avoid it than one who is not. Hence the importance of the history of exegesis for the theologian. Such a study underlines the need to refrain from allowing a doctrinal framework to dominate the text; it also reminds one that the Word of God must be heard anew in every generation. The latest exegesis or the latest theological insight is not the first time that new light has been shed on the text—nor will it be the last.<sup>12</sup>

As a part of my former training, I was taught “to speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent.”<sup>13</sup> This slogan is still cited by many well-meaning Christians to justify their separation from other believers. On the surface, this cliché appears to express that which every Christian strives toward. The “catch phrase” sounded excellent and still has a nice ring of truth, but, there is a problem in quoting this group of words—no one adheres perfectly to

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<sup>10</sup> **Christopher J. H. Wright** is the international ministry director of Langham Partnership. He was formerly principal of All Nations Christian College, and taught at Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, India. His books include *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, *The Mission of God*, *The Message of Ezekiel*, the *New International Biblical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, and *The Mission of God’s People*.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, “Interpreting the Bible Among the World Religions,” *Themelios* 25, no. 3 (2000): 36.

<sup>12</sup> Graham N. Stanton, “Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism,” in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. Marshall Howard I. (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 1977), 68. **Graham Stanton** is a professor of New Testament studies at King’s College in London.

<sup>13</sup> For a thorough investigation of this phrase as to its original meaning and its history, see Dallas Burdette, “Where the Scriptures Speak,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2008), 87-152.

this catchy construction. First of all, there is a difference between speaking **as** the Bible speaks and speaking **where** the Bible speaks.

God's people may cite Scripture as Satan did in his encounter with Jesus, but just as Satan did not give the intent of the Scripture cited, so today, many Christians refer to certain "pet" Scriptures, and, at the same time, do not speak **as** the Bible speaks (Matthew 4:1-11). Even though Satan quoted Scripture, he did not interpret Scripture in light of its context.<sup>14</sup> It took me a long time to learn this basic rule. **To interpret any text faithfully, the interpreter must endeavor to transfer himself from the present era to the historical situation of the author, look through his eyes, observe his surroundings, feel with his heart, and catch his emotions if he or she wishes to accurately apply the Word of God to the twenty-first century church. Remember, the Scriptures were not written TO US, but FOR US.** This means that the interpreter must guard himself or herself carefully against transferring the authors of the first-century to the twenty-first century and, then, interpreting their words in the light of his or her own twenty-first century understanding.

## CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

Hermeneutics, until very recently, has never considered sufficiently the power of the reader in coming to understanding. It has too often been assumed that to read is to understand, especially after Scottish "common sense" reading gave the impression that we all have the capacity to interpret automatically what we read. However, that is not true. Every person brings to the task a set of "preunderstandings," that is, beliefs and ideas inherited from one's background and paradigm community. We rarely read the Bible to discover truth; more often, we wish to harmonize it with our belief system and see its meaning in light of our preconceived theological system<sup>15</sup>

The first step in explaining Scripture is to read the text.<sup>16</sup> To fathom a passage involves the *immediate* context, the *remote* context, and the *larger* context. The *immediate context* includes verses preceding and following the Scripture that one is studying. On the other hand,

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<sup>14</sup> For a detailed study on the fallacy of citing Scripture verbatim to uphold certain traditions without consulting context, see Dallas Burdette, "Literalism and Isolationism of Scripture," in Dallas Burdette, *Old Texts through New Eyes: Reexamination of Misunderstood Scriptures* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 257-273.

<sup>15</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. and expanded, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 29. **Grant R. Osborne** (1942–2018) was an award-winning author and theologian. Osborne earned a PhD from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. He also did academic research at the University of Cambridge and the University of Marburg. Osborne served as the professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Prior to that, he taught at Winnipeg Theological Seminary and the University of Aberdeen. Osborne was a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, the Evangelical Theological Society, and the Institute of Biblical Research. His areas of expertise included the Gospels, hermeneutics, and the book of Revelation. Along with editing The IVP New Testament Commentary Series and The Life Application Bible Commentary, Osborne also authored several titles including *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, the volume on *Revelation* in the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series, and several other commentary volumes.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. This book examines twenty-two major topics on misapplied Scriptures.

the *remote context* may take in the entire book in which the text is found. Also, the *larger context* may embrace the whole of God's written Revelation. This understanding of contexts helps to determine the meaning or meanings that believers attach to a distinct phrase. Otherwise, the interpreter may impose conjectured convictions on a text without due reflection upon what the author says. Without a conception of a context, a person's own particular context tends to shape his or her understanding and interpretation of the message.

Merely reciting Scriptures that draw attention to certain party dogmas is not sufficient to determine the meaning of the text. No one denies the truth of passages often enumerated to maintain the status quo, but we may deny the conclusions often reached by certain individuals. Every Scripture citation is the Word of God, but we must not equate our interpretation with the Word itself. Remember that the context is the determining factor in trying to arrive at a correct insight. We must not employ Holy Scriptures in a way the Holy Spirit did not employ them. Dr. Leroy Garrett<sup>17</sup> points out, with justification that interpreters must distinguish between God's Revelation and one's own interpretation. We ought to weigh carefully his thought and to listen to Him as he pinpoints this thought:

People tire of our equating our understanding of the word of God with the word of God itself. This is to say that we must distinguish between revelation and interpretation. Revelation is what God has given us in scripture. Interpretation is what we conclude the scriptures to mean. One is divine, the other human.<sup>18</sup>

"Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent" became the battle cry for the birth of the Reformation movement initiated by Thomas (1763-1854) and Alexander Campbell (1788-1866). This slogan became the impetus for a movement that resulted in three distinctive bodies: (1) Churches of Christ, (2) Christian Churches, and (3) Disciples of Christ. All three bodies subpoena this cliché to call attention to their reliance upon the Bible and the Bible alone for their faith and practice. The Campbells did not intend to start another denomination, even though this is what eventually happened in their quest for unity among all God's people. Even though all three movements rely upon the same motto, none can agree upon the exact blueprint, or exact pattern, for a so-called worship service supposedly set forth in the New Testament.

These ecclesiastical organizations cannot agree over the scripturalness of missionary societies, Bible colleges, located preachers (A located preacher is one who assumes the role of pulpit minister for the local church.), orphan homes, kitchens in the purported church buildings, and so on. These groups, as a whole, cannot agree upon a corporate worship pattern to be observed in the self-styled worship service; For example, they cannot agree on whether to have or not have Sunday school/Bible study classes on Sunday morning before the corporate worship

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<sup>17</sup> **Leroy Garrett (1918-2015)** taught as a professor of philosophy, history, and religion at Bethany College, Texas Woman's University, and Dallas Christian College. He was the editor of *Restoration Review* for 34 years and *Bible Talk* for six years.

<sup>18</sup> Leroy Garrett, "It Means What It Says," in *Restoration Review* 17, no. 4 (April 1975): 69.

gathering, individual cups or one common cup, instrumental music or vocal singing only, wine only or grape juice only, to *break* the bread or *pinch* the bread in the Lord's Supper, and so on.<sup>19</sup>

## RE-EVALUATION OF MY STUDIES

### Biblical Interpretation Has a History

Obstacle number seven is the obstacle of precedent. What I mean here is the very factual reality—and probably this might be new to some—that biblical interpretation itself has a history. There are lots of people that have come before us in every generation, from the apostles, the NT era, the NT writers themselves, all the way up to the present day, that have interpreted the Bible differently—not, again, because of all these other things we've talked about to this point, but they interpreted it differently because their methods were different. They had different methodological presuppositions. They had different methodological techniques that had been taught to them and passed down by their forefathers as, “This is how you look at the Bible. This is how you interpret the Bible.”<sup>20</sup>

Approximately sixty years ago, J. Ervin Waters (1918-2015),<sup>21</sup> a well-known evangelist, writer, and debater among the “one cup” fellowship of God's people, suggested that I read a book on biblical hermeneutics (1888) by David Dungan (1837-1921),<sup>22</sup> which I did. Later, I read another monumental study in this same field by Milton S. Terry (1840-1914).<sup>23</sup> Both of these writers had a profound influence on my re-evaluation of my cherished beliefs. Waters also introduced me to *Christianity Restored* by Alexander Campbell and to Robert Milligan's (1814-1875) book on the *Scheme of Redemption*. In addition to these works, he sent me five books by the famous Greek scholar from Moody Institute, Kenneth Wuest (1893-1961), to assist me in my spiritual growth. Prior to this time, I don't ever remember reading any book or books except debate books and sermon outlines. The writings of these authors contributed to leading me out of my sectarian spirit.

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<sup>19</sup> As stated above, for a detailed explanation of this subject, see Dallas Burdette “Where the Scriptures Speak,” In Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberalism* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2008), 87-149.

<sup>20</sup> Michael S. Heiser, ed., “Segment 8—Obstacle #7,” in *BI101 Introducing Biblical Interpretation: Contexts and Resources* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Ervin Waters was still associated with the one-cup and NonSunday school movement until his death. Even though the major faction in this movement refused to recognize him as in good standing with the group known as the Old Paths Advocate—a religious journal published by the one-cup and NonSunday school fellowship, he continued his ministry as a faithful servant of our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>22</sup> D. R. Dungan, *Hermeneutics* (Delight, Arkansas: Gospel Light Publishing Co, n.d.).

<sup>23</sup> Milton S. Terry (1840-1914), *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments*, reprint, nd (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988). **Milton Spenser Terry** was a pastor and professor who taught apologetics, comparative religion, and Old Testament. Finding Jesus in every corner of the Old Testament was his specialty, and he frequently gave sermons and addresses on Old Testament prophecies, revealing the God of the Old Testament as a God of grace. He wrote extensively on apologetics, philosophy, comparative religions, and dogmatics, developing his own massive works on Christianity's fundamentals.



Soon after this exposure to the science of interpretation, I started reading the writings of Thomas Campbell (1763-1854) and Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), M. S. Whitehead,<sup>24</sup> Carl Ketcherside (1908-1989), Leroy Garrett (1918-2015), and F. L. Lemley.<sup>25</sup> These men sought to recapture the original intent of the Word of God. They called upon Christians to reexamine their long-cherished traditions. They addressed the subject of fellowship with its ramifications upon Christian unity. They also tried to bring back the original meaning of the word *ekklesia* (commonly translated “church”) and its implications toward a broader fellowship of believers. They questioned the practice of rebaptism, as it exists, even to this day (2021) within the Churches Christ, and its devastating effect upon the Christian community for unity.<sup>26</sup> They investigated the distinction between *Gospel* and doctrine and its implications upon our understanding of fellowship. What they wrote shocked me to the point that initially I thought they were all a little nuts.

But as I read more and more of their writings, I began to reinvestigate my earlier teachings. As a result of their writings, I had to re-evaluate many of my former convictions. For example, I had to reflect upon the original meaning of the word “church” (*ekklesia*), the concept of limited knowledge about God’s Word as the norm within the church, the meaning of the word “*Gospel*” as being “*Good News*,” the correct use of the word “doctrine” as employed in the New Testament, rethink the roots or causes of our divisions within the body of Christ, and to confront squarely the question of so-called “brothers and sisters in error.” Carl Ketcherside, like myself, began his ministry as a legalist and later changed his outlook on unity among God’s people. Douglas Foster and others produced a book dealing with the Stone-Campbell Movement. Leroy Garrett wrote about the beginning of Carl’s ministry and the change that came about later in his ministry. The following comments should awaken all of God’s people to stop and rethink their prior stance on certain issues and work toward unity. Garrett wrote:

In 1940 he began publishing the *Mission Messenger*, which continued for thirty-six years. For almost two decades this journal championed the Sommerite cause, as did the editor’s extensive preaching and debating. By 1957, however, a dramatic change occurred. Ketcherside confessed that he had been sectarian in his earlier ministry and resolved that he would henceforth work for peace and unity among all heirs of the Restoration heritage.

From this time until his death in 1989, he insisted that mutual love is the only answer to “problems in long division.” He widely proclaimed that, “Wherever God has a child, I have a brother or sister.” Resolved no longer to debate his brothers and sisters, he rather called them together in unity meetings across the country.

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<sup>24</sup> M. S. Whitehead, a few years after our meeting in Lowery, placed membership with the Vonora Ave. Church of Christ in Montgomery, AL. Vonora Ave. is still a one-cup and non-Sunday school church. Even though he met with the one-cup group, he did not believe that the use of individual cups was sinful.

<sup>25</sup> I quote extensively from the writings of Thomas and Alexander Campbell, Carl Ketcherside, and Leroy Garrett in this study. Why? It is simply that these men recognized the same principles in their literature that I had read from Dungan, Terry, and Berkhof’s works on Hermeneutics.

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed study of this subject (rebaptism), see my essay on “Rebaptism in the Stone/Campbell Movement,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom*, 196-235. Upon request, I am willing to send this study as an attachment in an email—no charge. My email address: dburdette22@charter.net.

During these years Ketcherside spoke on virtually every college campus among all three streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement, as well as at hundreds of congregations of all persuasions. His message was compelling, reflecting his own transformation: “It is time for a new day to dawn. We have led in dividing, now let us lead in uniting.”<sup>27</sup>

As a result of my in-depth studies, I, too, had to alter, or rethink, my position on many doctrinal conclusions. **For the first time in my life I went to the Bible to see what it taught rather than to prove what I already believed.** I learned that one must transfer himself mentally into the minds of the first-century authors and stand upon their threshold and look through their eyes and see things as they saw them, rather than transfer the writers of the first century to the twenty-first century and, then, interpret their words in the light of my present day understanding.<sup>28</sup>

### **Assemblies of the Anointed One**

One of the most difficult questions that confronted me in my early years of ministry had to do with the so-called name of the church. My spiritual teacher taught me that one could read about the **churches of Christ** in Romans 16:16, which is true. I could quote Romans 16:16 by memory. From this kind of literal citation of Scripture, without regards to the context, I developed my theology about the name of the church, which just happened to be the “Church of Christ” that came out of the Stone/Campbell movement. We reasoned like this: Where in the Bible do you read of a Baptist Church or a Methodist Church or a Presbyterian Church? We can read about the Church of Christ Church in Romans 16:16, but we cannot read about the others. On the surface, this argument appeared to have some validity, but the dilemma in this kind of dialectic was/is that Christ was not our Lord’s name, but rather, His official appellation (title). Matthew (1:21) tells us that his name was Jesus. For some reason, we never cited Romans 16:4 that speaks of “the **churches of the Gentiles.**” Is “churches of the Gentiles” also the name of the church? Also, we never called attention to Galatians 1:22: “I was personally unknown to the **churches of Judea** that are in Christ.” Is the “**churches of Judea**” the name of the church also? To advance the notion that Romans 16:16 is the name of the church is to outrun the evidence in the text.

After spending considerable hours in the science of biblical interpretation, I resolved to go to the Book of Romans to see what it said, rather than to prove what I already believed. After studying Romans 16:16, I discovered that the name *Christ* is simply the transliteration of the

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<sup>27</sup> Leroy Garrett, “Ketcherside, W. Carl (1908–1989),” ed. Douglas A. Foster et al., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, Churches of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 446.

<sup>28</sup> See L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation: Sacred Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 115. **Louis Berkhof** (1873–1957) was a Reformed theologian whose works remain highly influential. He taught at Calvin Theological Seminary from 1906 and served as its president from 1931–1944. Berkhof’s writings, including his *Systematic Theology*, presented Reformed thought in the tradition of John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, and Herman Bavinck. Throughout his tenure at Calvin, he stressed the importance of orthodoxy, a focus shown in his works.

Greek word *Christos*, which is equivalent to the Hebrew word *Messiah*.<sup>29</sup> The word “*christ*” was a designation that God gave to prophets, priests and kings. Prophets were “christ,” priests were “christ,” and kings were “christ,” but Jesus was not just one christ among many christs; He was “the Christ,” that is, the Anointed One of God. According to the Greek text, what did Paul write in Romans 16:16? Since the word “*christ*” means “**anointed**,” and since the word *church* means “**assembly**,” then, the correct translation is: “the assemblies of the Anointed One salutes you.” This verse is simply referring to the various assemblies as belonging to the Anointed One of God, not simply the Churches of Christ as a distinctive denomination.

The question that confronts every Christian, as it did me, is: does Paul designate the denominational Churches of Christ in Romans 16:16 as the Churches of Christ today? In the beginning of my ministry, I was taught that the Churches of Christ that Paul addressed in Romans 16:16 were the one-cup and non-Sunday churches with which I was associated. The true Church of Christ had to do with my particular fellowship, no one else, all others were **digressive**.<sup>30</sup> In fact, we taught that everyone who disagreed with our brand of orthodoxy was on the way to “hell.” This philosophy is still advanced by many within the one-cup and non-Sunday school movement.<sup>31</sup> Today, many sincere and devout believers within the Churches of Christ (not just one-cup and non-Sunday school churches) do not recognize any other fellowship of believers as members of the Lord’s church. On the other hand, the one-cup and non-Sunday school Churches of Christ do not even recognize those within the Churches of Christ as Christians if they use multiple cups in the distribution of the fruit of the vine and utilize Sunday school or Bible study classes in their curriculum for teaching both children and adults.

Almost without exception, the Churches of Christ do not accept Baptists as Christians. Don King, son of the late Homer L. King (1892-1983) and editor of the *Old Paths Advocate*, published about nineteen years ago (February 2006) an essay written in 1969 in the *Old Paths Advocate* by J. Wayne McKamie concerning “The Baptist Church.”<sup>32</sup> Many within the one-cup and non-Sunday school movement do not recognize anyone as a Christian who does not subscribe to the narrow views of their distinctive fellowship. For example, as a result of this same mindset, King’s son, Don King, now editor of the OPA, writes: “Listen, brethren: we believe it is wrong to use more than one cup. We believe **people are going to be lost** for using

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<sup>29</sup> See Carl Ketcherside, “The Name of the Bride,” *Mission Messenger* 19, no. 4 (April 1957): 9-10.

<sup>30</sup> The word *digressive* is employed by many Christians to denote those outside the boundaries of one’s own tradition(s).

<sup>31</sup> Many within this movement today are rethinking their traditions. In 2006, I conducted two seminars on how to read the Word of God more accurately. I had several preachers from the one-cup and non-Sunday school fellowship to attend. These preachers came under the cover of darkness, so to speak. I am still in contact with some of these men of God. This study had a profound effect upon their understanding of Christianity. I continue to receive calls from some of these brethren. Many believers within this group are just now learning about God’s grace. One of my second cousins was accused of being a false teacher for preaching on grace. He is still a part of the one-cup and non-Sunday school movement. This congregation has been disfellowshipped by many within this same movement, especially those associated with the *Old Paths Advocate* journal.

<sup>32</sup> J. Wayne McKamie, “The Baptist Church,” in *Old Paths Advocate*, Vol. LXXX, no. 2 (February, 2006): 8, 9.

more than one cup”<sup>33</sup> (Emphasis mine—Dallas Burdette). During the funeral service of my aunt (Katherine Hamer Buckner: 1911-2004), a preacher and brother in Christ (member of the one-cup fellowship) told me that I was going to “burn in Hell” if I did not return to the “true church,” namely, the one-cup fellowship.

I never questioned the truthfulness of this line of reasoning for the first seventeen years of my ministry. **However, years later, I did speculate about where the Church of Christ was when Luther (1483-1546) nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the castle in Wittenberg in 1517. Also, I wondered where the Church of Christ was when Pope Urban II (1049-1099) launched the first Christian crusade in 1095.**<sup>34</sup> The truth of the matter is, there was no such ecclesiastical organization known as the Church of Christ as a distinct denominational body. Now, it is true that Christ’s church was in existence, but not the denominational Church of Christ; it did not exist.<sup>35</sup> This particular group did not come along until the time of Thomas and Alexander Campbell in the 1800s. In the early part of my ministry, I rejected the concept that the Church of Christ is a denomination, but this was not the case with its founder, Alexander Campbell. As early as 1840, Campbell wrote a letter to a Baptist scholar, Andrew Broaddus, whom he called brother, about his concern over the written history of the Reformation Movement:

Whenever the history of this effort at reformation shall have been faithfully written, it will appear, we think, bright as the sun, that our career has been marked with a spirit of forbearance, moderation, and love of union with an unequivocal desire for preserving the integrity, harmony, and co-operation of all who teach one faith, one Lord, and one immersion. In confirmation of this fact I am happy to add that no Baptist of good character for piety and morality has ever been, because of a diverse theory or opinion, excluded from our communion or communities. We, as a **denomination**, are as desirous as ever to unite and co-operate with all Christians on the broad and vital principles of the New and everlasting Covenant (emphasis mine).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Don L. King, “Editorial: Proper Perspective,” *Old Paths Advocate*, Vol. LXVII, no. 9 (September, 1995): 2.

<sup>34</sup> I am indebted to Leroy Garrett for calling attention to the origin of the Church of Christ Church with his article, “Is August 17, 1889 the Birthday of the Church of Christ?” in *Restoration Review* 17, no. 1 (January 1975): 6-9.

<sup>35</sup> Many Christians object to the word denomination as applicable to the Church of Christ; many within the Churches of Christ identify their movement as the Lord’s church in order to distinguish it from other denominations. For an excellent analysis of the meaning of the word “denomination,” see Carl Ketcherside, “The Name Pattern,” *Mission Messenger* 32, no. 3 (August 1970): 113, where he says,

The very word **denomination**, from the Latin *de* and *nominare*, to call by a name, means, “to give a name to; designate by a name or title; to call by a distinctive name or designation.” Any group which selects and appropriates to itself a specific name, title or brand, is a denomination, whether the title it selects is from words found in the Bible, or composed of words not even mentioned in the sacred volume. The *ekklesia* of God had no specific name in its inception. The saints were corporately designated only by simple nouns. All of these describe a relationship. Not a one was used as an exclusive title.

<sup>36</sup> **Alexander Campbell**, “The Editor’s Response to Mr. Broaddus,” *Millennial Harbinger*, New Series, 4, no. XII (December 1840): 556.

We (twenty-first century Christians), in the Stone/Campbell movement, have made the mistake of identifying the “church” with the Church of Christ that came out of the nineteenth-century Reformation Movement initiated by the Campbells and Barton W. Stone, thereby excluding all others from belonging to Jesus. The truth of the matter is, there is only one church. There is, in reality, no such thing as a Baptist Church, a Methodist Church, a Presbyterian Church, or a Church of Christ Church. There is only one church, and that one church consists of all those who, in spite of their denominational labels, have put their faith in Jesus as the redeemer. Carl Ketcherside (1908-1989) used the following pregnant words to describe the current dilemma of the Churches of Christ today.

I do not believe there is any such thing as either “The Christian Church” or “The church of Christ.” **There are religious parties designated by these titles, but there is only one church. There never was but one. There will never be another.** “The Christian Church” does not have all of the Christians in it, and “The Church of Christ” is not **the** church of Christ. Both of these parties which have been allowed to grow out of an American restoration movement launched by some ministers in the early part of the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold)

This article by Ketcherside was the beginning of my re-evaluation of the nature of God’s church. Thus far, I have continuously employed the term *church* to describe the people of God. As stated above, I had a rude awakening when I discovered that our English word *church* was not an accurate translation of the Greek Word “*ekklesia*” and that the word that Paul used in Romans 16:16 merely meant an “assembly.” In other words, God’s assembly consists of those who put their faith in Jesus as God’s Anointed One. As stated above, there is no such thing as a Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, or a Church of Christ church; there is only one “*ekklesia*” and that body includes all believers. It is significant that the word *ekklesia* appears eighty-one times in the Greek Old Testament (LXX), but it is never translated “church” in our English translations.<sup>38</sup> Leroy Garrett (1918-2015) says it best: “It is as a family that we must come to

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<sup>37</sup> Carl Ketcherside, “Fear and Suspicion,” in *Mission Messenger* 25, no. 2 (February 1963): 27.

<sup>38</sup> Carl Ketcherside, “The Name of the Bride,” *Mission Messenger* 19, no. 4 (April 1957): 9 where he says:

The title “Church of Christ” as used by a large segment of believers today is employed in a denominational sense, just as the terms Baptist Church, Methodist Church, Christian Church, etc. This is very difficult for many to see, for they have been taught that their salvation depends upon the name “The Church of Christ” although that expression is not once found in the sacred scripture. The idea that a wife should wear her husband’s name as he means it, is not a scriptural one. No married woman in Bible times was ever called by her husband’s name. That practice is a fairly modern one and by no means universal even now. The word “church” is not a name at all. It is a common noun like “house” or “wife.” His name was Jesus, and that is what he was called at birth, but “God hath made that same Jesus . . . both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). Christ is no more his name than is the word “Lord.” The word “Christ” is merely the Greek form of the Hebrew “Messiah.” It isn’t a name at all: it is an office which God made him to occupy.

I read this article in July 1964. This essay caused me to rethink my position on the name of the church. At this time I was still associated with the one-cup and non-Sunday school movement. In fact, I did not leave

see the church. It is not an institution or organization, but a family community of brother and sisters.”<sup>39</sup> Thomas Campbell, in 1809, penned the following words in his *Declaration and Address*:

**Prop. 1.** That the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else; as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.<sup>40</sup>

At the time Thomas Campbell wrote these words, there was no such thing as the Church of Christ Church. In fact, Campbell was Presbyterian at the time. For him the church of Christ consisted of all who put their faith in Jesus as Lord. His objective in writing this *Declaration and Address* was to set forth biblical principles upon which fellowship is founded, not the traditions of men. He admitted that the church of Christ in his day comprised people from all denominations. He wrote in his second proposition the following succinct statement about the divisions existing in his day:

**Prop. 2.** That although the Church of Christ upon earth must necessarily exist in particular and distinct societies locally separate one from another, yet there ought to be no schisms, no uncharitable divisions among them. They ought to receive each other as Christ Jesus hath also received them, to the glory of God. And for this purpose they ought all to walk by the same rule, to mind and speak the same thing; and to be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment.<sup>41</sup>

Proposition Two set the stage for his comments on “**inferences and deductions**” from Scripture. Even today, it is not uncommon for Christians to try to force agreement based upon their **inferences and deductions** from the Word of God. This practice of forcing conformity as a condition of fellowship was also prevalent in my early ministry—some preachers carried debate propositions with them in their coat pockets, ready to debate at the drop of a hat—differences existed on every street corner. Thomas Campbell captured my attention when he forcefully dealt with the enforcement, on the part of some, of “**inferences and deductions**” as essential to Christian fellowship. Thus, I had to deal with his comments in light of Scripture. **Proposition Six** reads:

**Prop. 6.** That although **inferences and deductions** from Scripture premises, when fairly inferred, may be truly called the doctrine of God’s holy word, yet are they not formally binding upon the consciences of Christians farther than they perceive the connection, and evidently see that they are so; for their faith must not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power and veracity of God. Therefore,

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that movement until 1968. Even though all my so-called Gospel meetings and preaching engagements were cancelled, I later returned to preach, at their request, for the Vonora Ave. Church of Christ from about 1970 to 1973. In spite of this return, the OPA fellowship still refused to recognize me as a faithful child of God.

<sup>39</sup> Leroy Garrett, “The Catholicity of the Church,” *Restoration Review* 15, no. 3 (March 1973): 45. The writings of Garrett are also available on the Internet. His website is: <http://www.leroygarrett.org>.

<sup>40</sup> **Thomas Campbell**, *Declaration and Address* (St. Louis, Missouri: Mission Messenger, 1975, reprint), 44 [page numbers are from the reprint edition].

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

no such deductions can be made terms of communion, but do properly belong to the after and progressive edification of the Church. Hence, it is evident that no such **deductions** or **inferential** truths ought to have any place in the Church's confession.<sup>42</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold)

## Fellowship and Agreement

Through my studies I came to understand that no individual possesses absolute knowledge.<sup>43</sup> Since all Christians possess limited knowledge, then, do we come into communion by agreement upon all Scripture? Common sense tells us that we do not! **Fellowship** is not a fruit of **agreement** but agreement is a fruit of fellowship.<sup>44</sup> As a result of this revelation, I had to wrestle with the following question: If we do not enjoy flawless insight into the Scriptures, does God condemn us to an eternal burning hell for a lack of an honest mistake of the heart? The answer to this question is an unqualified NO!<sup>45</sup>

What is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit concerning this question? The Apostle Paul goes right to the heart of the issue when he writes: “We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God” (1 Corinthians 8:1-3).<sup>46</sup> Again, Paul writes, “Accept him whose faith is weak . . . who are you to judge someone else's servant? . . . Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:1a, 4a, 5b). Paul is saying that believers ought not to denounce one another as dishonest guides when they do not dot every “i” and cross every “t” in the same way. Tolerance toward differences is the subject of Paul's admonition for unity, not absolute conformity in belief with other believers. But someone may ask, “Are we in fellowship with error?” No, we are in fellowship

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>43</sup> This statement does not deny that God's Word is absolute, but rather, that our knowledge of God's Word is relative. This relativity of knowledge is one of the reasons that Paul rebuked the Corinthians and the Romans for not making allowances for differences. In the dawning of my ministry, I violated the principles laid down by Paul. I did not make a distinction between my interpretation of God's Word and the Word itself. In other words, I equated my interpretation with God's Revelation. I do not know why this never occurred to me in my earlier ministry. In this perception, for lack of a better term, I was brain-dead. For a detailed study of the subject of absolute knowledge, please see Chapter Five, “Knowledge Puffs Up.”

<sup>44</sup> See Carl Ketcherside, “Thoughts on Fellowship,” *Mission Messenger* 20, no. 2 (July 1958): 2. The writings of Ketcherside are available through the Internet. His website is: <http://www.unity-in-diversity.org>. There are also audio files available on this website.

<sup>45</sup> For a more detailed study on “fellowship and agreement,” see Dallas Burdette, *False Prophets in the Gospel of Matthew, Who Are They?* (D.Min. dissertation, Erskine Theological Seminary, 1999), pages 1-21.

<sup>46</sup> For a more detailed study of 1 Corinthians 8:1-3, see my study on, “Knowledge Puffs Up.” As stated earlier, on February 21, 1969, I remember very vividly sharing the eighth chapter of 1 Corinthians with a relative of mine (who also was a preacher within the one-cup fellowship). There was utter rejection of what was stated about “knowledge puffs up.” In fact, he even denied that that particular teaching was in the Bible. The amazing thing is that he had read that Scripture dozens of time, but, for some reason, it never registered with him as to what Paul was saying. The reason, perhaps, is that that specific Scripture did not coincide with his theology. It seems to me that the words of Jesus are very appropriate here: “He who has ears, let him hear” (Matthew 11:15). His misunderstanding was not rebellion against God, but rather it was an honest mistake of the heart.

with fellows. The question is often asked, “Are you in fellowship with brothers and sisters in error?” My answer is yes, because this is the only kind of believers that I know about.<sup>47</sup> For some reason, my inconsistencies never became visible to me until the late sixties; it was then that I recognized that I was one of those brothers in error.<sup>48</sup>

How do we deal with truth and error in the church? This question confronted me head on. I finally came to the conclusion that **all truth is true**, but not all truth is essential to our salvation; **all error is error**, but not all error will condemn our souls. Absolute freedom from error is not a condition of salvation else all of us would be damned.<sup>49</sup> **We are not saved by attainment to a certain degree of knowledge, but by faith in Christ Jesus.** All truth is essential to our well being, but some truth is essential to our being. For example, let us consider the physical body for an analogy. All the members of our body are for our well being, but if we lose a leg, an arm, or a finger, we would be only handicapped or incapacitated. But if, on the other hand, we should lose our head, we would be dead. The same analogy may be applied to Jesus. We may be wrong about some doctrinal point(s) and still be saved, but if we are wrong about Jesus, we can be lost. On this particular point, Alexander Campbell has captured this truth and is well worth citing:

The Apostle says, ‘There is one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one immersion, one God and Father of all.’ But nowhere is it said in the sacred book, “There is one opinion.” If, however, unity of opinion were desirable, to attain it, we must give the greatest liberty of opinion; for though once theory with us, it is now matter of experience, that the more stress is laid upon unity of opinion, the less of it, and the more division; and the less regard paid to it, the less emphasis laid upon it, the more we will have of it. This is founded in a law of the human mind, on which it is unseasonable and unnecessary to expatiate.<sup>50</sup>

In the early phases of my ministry, I did not distinguish between *fellowship* and *agreement*. I had never fathomed the idea that fellowship does not come as a result of our agreement upon matters of opinion and interpretation, but that our ability to reach agreement upon these things may come as a result of our fellowship. We are not one in opinion; we are one in Christ. It is not our study of Holy Scripture, our acquisition of knowledge, our learning of the Law, or our ability as teacher or expounder of God’s Word that makes us children of God. We become children by procreation, not education. Ketcherside does well to remind us:

Jesus died for persons and not for their opinions or ideas, right or wrong, and those for whom he died must be more important to us than anything for which he did not die. As God accepted us in our weakness, with mistaken ideas, warped views and unhealthful attitudes, so we must accept each other in the same state or condition. We must not make the kingdom of heaven to consist of our

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<sup>47</sup> See Carl Ketcherside, “Fear and Suspicion,” *Mission Messenger* 25, no. 2 (February 1963): 27.

<sup>48</sup> For an excellent treatment of the distinction between fellowship and endorsement, I highly recommend Carl Ketcherside, “Thoughts on Fellowship,” *Mission Messenger* 20, no. 2 (February 1957): 3-6.

<sup>49</sup> See Carl Ketcherside, “Another Gospel,” *Mission Messenger* 27, no. 1 (January 1965): 7.

<sup>50</sup> **Alexander Campbell**, “To Mr. William Jones, of London, Letter IV,” *Millennial Harbinger* 6, no. 3 (March 1835): 111-112.



convictions, attitudes or opinions, but of citizens who must be tolerant of each other in such matters, else there can be no kingdom of heaven at all.<sup>51</sup>

## Gospel and Doctrine

Next, we need to distinguish between *Gospel* and *doctrine*, a distinction drawn by the writers of the new covenant Scriptures—a distinction that I did not make in the olden days of my ministry. At a later date, I did come to realize that there is as much difference between the Gospel of Christ<sup>52</sup> and the apostolic doctrine as there is between the sperm from which a child is begotten and the food that he or she eats after one is born. Through my reexamination of Gospel and doctrine, I came to understand that Paul knew the difference between the seed from which life came and the daily bread upon which the children fed. He knew the difference between *Gospel* and *doctrine* and between faith and knowledge. He knew that the Gospel brought us into being while the doctrine was/is essential to our growth and well being, and he did not make a test of fellowship out of spiritual digestion. Ketcherside brought this point home to me, when he wrote: “Those who confuse chastisement of a child with begetting and cannot distinguish between correction and conception are in a sad predicament.”<sup>53</sup>

In my early preaching I looked upon the Gospel as being composed of twenty-seven books. But, after investigating the word “*Gospel*,” I discovered that the Gospel may be epitomized in three saving facts: namely, the Death, Burial, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). The Holy Spirit does not identify the Gospel as everything recorded in the Bible. The fellowship of believers with whom I associated did not differentiate between *Gospel* and *doctrine*; therefore, for one to disagree on doctrine was tantamount to preaching another Gospel,<sup>54</sup> for which a curse must be pronounced on the perpetrator. It is true that we must be correct concerning the Gospel, but an individual does not have to be accurate on every doctrinal teaching in the Scriptures to be saved—as I had previously been taught and advocated for several years. But in this philosophy, we were not always consistent. We made allowances for other differences, but we did not make concession for our ritualistic pattern of “five acts of worship” on Sunday morning.<sup>55</sup>

It appeared, so it seemed to me, that God made a separation between “*Gospel*” and “*teaching*.” As stated above, there is as much difference between the Gospel of Christ and the apostolic doctrine as there is between the sperm from which a child is begotten and the food

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<sup>51</sup> Carl Ketcherside, “Contrary to the Doctrine,” *Mission Messenger* 27, no. 3 (March 1965): 35-36.

<sup>52</sup> For an examination of the meaning of the word *Gospel*, see Dallas Burdette, “The Heart of God’s Gospel,” in Dallas Burdette, *Biblical Preaching and Teaching: Jesus and Our Privileges*, Volume 1 (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 319-340.

<sup>53</sup> Carl Ketcherside, “Gospel and Doctrine,” *Mission Messenger* 27, no. 2 (February 1965): 23.

<sup>54</sup> For an analysis of “Preaching in the Early Church,” see Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Mainland, FL: Xulon Press, 2008), 344-342.

<sup>55</sup> For a more detailed study of the peculiarities of the one-cup and non-Sunday school movement, see Chapter 2, “A Brief History of the One Cup and non-Sunday School Movement,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom*, 27-54. For additional oddities about this Movement, see “Oddities in Pattern Theology,” *Ibid.*, 55-86.

that he or she eats after birth.<sup>56</sup> The purpose of the Gospel is to enlist men and women into the army of Christ; the doctrine (teaching) constitutes a manual of arms and a book of discipline to develop the soldiers of Christ into a fighting force. I confused chastisement of a child with begettal and did not distinguish between correction and conception. I discovered that it is the Holy Spirit that inducts a subject into the one body, not precise knowledge of the five acts of worship, as we commonly called them. Every sincere baptized believer is brought into the fellowship of the saints in spite of his or her inadequate understanding of God's Word.

## **Fellowship and Endorsement**

Having arrived at a better comprehension of "*Gospel and doctrine*,"<sup>57</sup> I turned my attention to the subject of endorsement. In my early years of preaching and teaching, I did not differentiate between "*fellowship* and *endorsement*," which was one of the major "hang ups" in the brotherhood then, as well as it is today (2021). I labored under the impression that to have fellowship with someone with whom I disagreed was to endorse whatever the other person believed. After much soul searching, I finally came to the judgement that fellowship and endorsement could not possibly be the same. For example, who would be so naïve to give credence to the idea that God sanctions all things we perform, believe, or voice? Surely no one would hold to such a preposterous notion. Yet, we all maintain that we are in fellowship with God, in spite of the shortcomings in our lives and beliefs.

Many Christians do not think this lack of knowledge or failure in perfection affects their relationship with God—it just applies to other people. **I had to struggle with the question:** does fellowship with God indicate that God endorses everything we believe, do, and say? Surely, the answer is NO! For us to be in fellowship with God does not indicate that God puts his signature to the whole shebang of what we believe, perform, or pronounce. Since this is so, then, why can we not be in fellowship with others and not necessarily endorse the many things that the other person gives approval to or practices?<sup>58</sup> Ketcherside drew my attention to the fact that

The fellowship of the new covenant is not based upon unanimity of opinion, interpretation, or even understanding of scriptural doctrine. It does not imply nor indicate endorsement of the position of one with whom we may differ. Fellowship is one thing; endorsement of a position taken by another is a wholly different thing. Fellowship of Christ, and in Christ, is a state or condition into

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<sup>56</sup> I am indebted to Carl Ketcherside for this perceptive insight.

<sup>57</sup> For an in-depth study of the Gospel, see Dallas Burdette, "Overview of Romans," in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom*, 249-281.

<sup>58</sup> Carl Ketcherside wrote one of the most informative articles that I have read about fellowship and endorsement. In his article, "Reply to Brother Thomas," in *Mission Messenger* 25, no. 4 (April 1963): 51-59. he nails the coffin shut, as it were, on the view that fellowship and endorsement are one and the same. I call attention to this perceptive essay on fellowship, because this response to Brother Thomas helped me to rethink the subject of biblical fellowship that is in keeping with the tenor of the Scriptures. This article is what I call common-sense interpretation.

which we are called by God through the gospel; endorsement of an interpretation or idea of one in or out of that fellowship is a rational act of our own minds.<sup>59</sup>

In my travel of faith, I came to grasp that I cannot make togetherness, or fellowship, dependent upon education. What I eventually came to understand about fellowship, later in my ministry, I also discovered that Alexander Campbell had written about these same issues in 1830—fellowship and endorsement. Campbell also faced the same kind of “know-it-all attitude” in the nineteenth century that I manifested in my earlier training. He said it best when he wrote:

It is cruel to excommunicate a man because of the imbecility of his intellect. We have been censured long and often for laying too much stress upon the assent of the understanding; but those who have most acrimoniously censured us, have laid much more stress upon the assent of the mind, than we have ever done. We never did, at any time, exclude a man from the kingdom of God for a mere imbecility of intellect; or in other words, because he could not assent to our opinions. All sects are doing, or have done this.<sup>60</sup>

My postulation of perfect knowledge of every detail of God’s Word required inerrancy and infallibility which I did not possess. This demand of perfection in knowledge, on my part, required that I be God. How are we reacting toward others today whose knowledge does not always agree with ours? Are we excluding men and women from the kingdom of God for mere feeble-mindedness of intellect? In my earlier ministry, I excluded every person from God’s kingdom that did not agree with our group. But thank God, I came to understand, through other godly men, a clearer perception of what Christianity is all about. It is a popular error to suppose that what I believe is the Word of God, but what you believe is not. In seeking to call attention to neglected truths, repetition is unavoidable. Leroy Garrett is perfectly right when he insists:

People tire of our equating our understanding of the word of God with the word of God itself. This is to say that we must distinguish between revelation and interpretation. Revelation is what God has given us in scripture. Interpretation is what we conclude the scriptures to mean. One is divine, the other human.<sup>61</sup>

### **Unity-in-Diversity versus Unity-in-Conformity**

In the beginning of my spiritual journey, I denied *unity-in-diversity*. *Unity-in-conformity* was the battle cry. If one did not conform to the traditions of the church, he or she faced expulsion, which is what ultimately happened to me. It never once occurred to me that Christians can no more all think alike than they can all look alike. This is just plain common-sense interpretation. A more excellent way of expressing the truthfulness of this philosophy is Ketcherside’s comments about observation:

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<sup>59</sup> Carl Ketcherside, “Thoughts on Fellowship,” in *Mission Messenger* 20, no. 2 (February 1957): 4.

<sup>60</sup> **Alexander Campbell**, “Millennium. – II,” in *Millennial Harbinger* 1 (5 April 1830): 122-123.

<sup>61</sup> Leroy Garrett, “What Kind of a Book Is the Bible? . . . ‘It Means What It Says,’” *Restoration Review* 17, no. 4 (April 1975): 69.

But we learn from observation, experience and the sacred Scriptures, that we do not all have the same degree of knowledge. God has made us all to differ in the intellectual realm as we do in the physical. We can no more all think alike than we can all look alike. No two of us upon earth attain to the same identical degree of knowledge about everything at the same moment. Any attempt to secure unity upon the basis of uniformity of knowledge or conformity in deductive or inferential process (e.g., doctrinal interpretation) is doomed before it begins.<sup>62</sup>

This article, by Ketcherside, helped me to crystallize my thinking in this area of “uniformity of knowledge.” I saw division on every street corner. We were divided into approximately twenty-five warring factions. Each was claiming to be the “true” Church of Christ. In fact, the congregation that I helped to establish in Montgomery, Alabama had a sign that read, “The loyal Church meets here.”<sup>63</sup> We had set up a system by which fellowship was/is conditioned upon alleged equality of knowledge, and, as a result, we created a state in which strife, division, and confusion prevailed. This fellowship of believers created an atmosphere in which no one dared to express an original thought. If one dared to think, one would be sent to the chopping block—agree with the *status quo* (the existing state of affairs) or face excommunication. This belief cut us off from every Christian who did not conform to our way of thinking. We were not in fellowship, so we thought, with “wine only” brethren,<sup>64</sup> with “bread breaking” brethren, with “individual cups” brethren, with “Sunday school” brethren, with “instrumental music” brethren, and so on.

For some reason, it never occurred to us that in the primitive community there was *diversity* of gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-6), *diversity* of functions (Romans 12:4-5), *diversity* in knowledge (1 Corinthians 3:1; 8:1-13; Romans 14:1—15:1-7), a *diversity* in understanding (1 Corinthians 8:2), and in customs (1 Corinthians 9:19-23; 10:31-33), and *diversity* in opinions (Romans 14). The writings of Thomas and Alexander Campbell helped to call attention to diversity in the Christian community. I cite Alexander Campbell once more because of his unique insight into the human predicament. Since our minds are affected by the traditions of the church that prevail in Christendom, by which vital truths of Christianity are secretly undermined or openly denied, we need to reflect upon the growth in the spiritual life of every believer. Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) drew attention to the fact:

Amongst Christians there is now, as there was at the beginning, a very great diversity in the knowledge of the Christian institution. There are babes, children, young men, and fathers in Christ now, as well as in the days of the Apostle John. This, from the natural gifts of God, from the

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<sup>62</sup> Carl Ketcherside, “Gospel and Doctrine,” *Mission Messenger* 27, no.2 (February 1965): 17-18.

<sup>63</sup> This congregation was started in my mother’s (Thelma Haygood, 1913-2000) and step-father’s (Teddy Haygood, 1904-1978) home on Madison Avenue (1952). This church still exists and is known as the Vonora Avenue Church of Christ. The congregation continues to advocate the use of the common cup and no Sunday school. Raymond Miller (1932-2010), my first cousin and son of the late E. H. Miller, preached for this local fellowship in Montgomery, AL until his death.

<sup>64</sup> Some Christians in the one-cup and non-Sunday school fellowship advocated the use of wine in the Lord’s Supper, not grape juice. As a result of this belief, the wine only brother or sister would not fellowship the grape juice only group and the grape juice only group would not fellowship the wine only group.

diversities of age, education, and circumstances, is unavoidable. And would it not be just as rational and as scriptural to excommunicate one another, because our knowledge is less or greater than any fixed measure, as for differences of opinion on matters of speculation?

Indeed, in most cases where proscription [an imposed restraint or restriction : PROHIBITION] and exclusions now occur in this country, the excluded are the most intelligent members of the society; and although no community will accuse a man because he knows more of his Bible than his brethren, and on this account exclude him from their communion; yet this, it is manifest, rather than heresy, (of which, however, for consistency's sake, he must be accused,) is, in truth, the real cause of separation.

If God has bestowed better gifts or better opportunities on one man than another, by which he has attained more knowledge, instead of thanking God for his kindness to the community, they beg God to take him away; and if he will not be so unkind, they will at length put him from among them under the charge of heresy. In most instances the greatest error of which a brother can be guilty, is to study his Bible more than his companions –or, at least, to surpass them in his knowledge of the mystery of Christ.<sup>65</sup>

### Believers in Error

In my pilgrimage of faith, I became aware that in Christ Jesus all believers are in error on many doctrinal points. Through common-sense interpretation, I came to the realization that absolute freedom from error in all doctrinal problems is not a condition of salvation, else all men would be damned. We are not saved by attainment to an unmistakable degree of knowledge but by faith in Christ Jesus. **I came to realize that the only Christians we have are saints in error. In my earlier phases of changing, Christians often asked me if I am in fellowship with error. To this inquiry, I answered no!** I am in fellowship with people, not error. Ketcherside expressed the basic problem well in his discussion of “Another Gospel.”

Those who were in Christ in the days of the apostles were in error on many points. They were mistaken about a lot of things but they were not charged with ‘preaching another gospel.’ Freedom from error is not a condition of salvation else all men would be damned. We are not saved by attainment to a certain degree of knowledge but by faith in Christ Jesus. It is by belief of facts related to him, and not by grasp of abstract truth, that we are justified before God. Certainly it is neither by performance of meritorious deeds nor by legalistic conformity. When we postulate a program of justification by knowledge we hang ourselves on the gallows we have constructed to rid ourselves of others, unless we are prepared to make ourselves even more ridiculous by affirming that we know as much as God.<sup>66</sup>

Through my studies, I came to the realization that we must make a separation between “one faith”<sup>67</sup> and “one opinion.” It is **not** “What do you believe?”—the eager and sole inquiry of modern religious parties—**but rather**, “In whom do you believe?” This was the question

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<sup>65</sup> **Alexander Campbell**, “Christian Union,” in *Christianity Restored* (Rosemead, California: Old Paths Book Club, 1959), 127. I read this book in May, 1964.

<sup>66</sup> Carl Ketcherside, “Another Gospel,” *Mission Messenger* 27, no. 1 (January 1965): 6-7.

<sup>67</sup> For a detailed study of the “one faith” in Ephesians 4:5, see Dallas Burdette, “One Faith,” in Dallas Burdette, *Old Texts through New Eyes: Reexamination of Misunderstood Scriptures* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 339-382.

addressed by Christ to one who sought to know the truth: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (John 9:35). Alexander Campbell captures this truth when he writes:

But the grandeur, sublimity, and beauty of the foundation of hope, and of ecclesiastical or social union, established by the author and founder of Christianity, consisted in this, that THE BELIEF OF ONE FACT, and that upon the best evidence in the world, is all that is requisite, as far as faith goes, to salvation. The belief of ONE FACT, and submission to ONE INSTITUTION expressive of it, is all that is required of Heaven to admission into the church.<sup>68</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It was and is my firm conviction that most of the ardent or zealous leaders in every faction are striving to build up a narrow, bigoted, exclusive party of conformity, and the members of this odd or offbeat fellowship have allowed themselves to be brainwashed into thinking that the party of their allegiance is **the** kingdom of God, or what they call the “**true**” church, over which our Lord reigns in an exclusive sense. How many times have we heard the phrase, “We are the loyal church”? Each of these loyal churches has its own unwritten creed, its own clerical domination, its own coercion, its own religious papers, and its own compulsion of membership by threat and mental force to accept or suffer excommunication from the so-called faithful. The Churches of Christ, in its twenty-five or more divisions, have entangled and enslaved the souls of men and women. Recently, another one of their major leaders (Ronny Wade—1936-2020) in the one-cup fellowship went to be with the Lord.

In concluding my remarks about my growth and travel in “My Pilgrimage of Faith,” I remind each reader that **whenever we demand a program of justification by knowledge, then, we hang ourselves on the gallows we have constructed to rid ourselves of others, unless we are prepared to make ourselves even more foolish by affirming that we know as much as God.** My prayer is that you, the reader, will weigh carefully the concepts presented in this study (my spiritual journey) so that you will not make the same mistakes that I made in the earlier part of my spiritual voyage. As you read this in-depth study, please bear in mind that this essay is about **my personal journey** into God’s grace from legalism to freedom in Christ. Finally, as interpreters, we should always seek to draw out of the Scriptures rather than read into the Scriptures our biases. Craig L. Blomberg with Jennifer Foutz Markley set forth two basic principles of accurate interpretation. If one is going to interpret a text correctly, one must seek the original meaning, which technique is known as “exegesis” and the other method is known as “context”:

Exegesis comes from two Greek words, ἐξ (“from, of, out of”) and ἄγω (“to lead”), referring to the process of leading out from a text its original meaning. Exegesis is closely related to the art and science of hermeneutics (from Gk. ἑρμηνεύω, “interpret, translate”).<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> **Alexander Campbell**, “The Foundation of Hope and of Christian Union,” *Christian Baptist* 1, no. 9 (April 1824): 177.

<sup>69</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Jennifer Foutz Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), xii. **Craig L. Blomberg** (PhD. University of Aberdeen) is distinguished

The fourth step is to analyze the *literary context* of the passage at hand. This includes its most immediate contexts within the document itself, as well as more remote ones within the same book or, as with an anthology like the Bible, the most relevant surrounding literature. Identification of any figures of speech, distinctive literary forms or genres, or overall species of rhetoric is also important, lest we miss or misinterpret important nuances of the text that are less straightforward and clear than others.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., xiv.