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1Co 14:26 How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.

Playing with Fire

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As a boy growing up in the 1930s, I lived in a house built about the turn of the century with built-in accessories that homes today just do not have. Our kitchen boasted a flour bin built into the counter that would hold a fifty-pound flour sack. Naturally, my grandmother used to make some of the most delicious cakes ever made.

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The house also had a cooler built into its side. No, not an ice box—which is much more modern—but a cooler. This cooler, a cupboard built next to an outside wall, had four shelves made with slats spaced a half inch apart. At the cooler's bottom on the outside wall was a screened opening to the outside, and a similar one opened at the top about four feet higher. In principle, the cool air flowed in through the bottom, and the warm air escaped out the top. One might be surprised to learn that this unit would keep milk fresh for three days, even in warm weather.

Our kitchen also contained a laundry tub to float my toy boats in—and every Saturday, wash my clothes in. But the one kitchen item that I especially enjoyed was our stove. It stood on four long, spindly legs, and over each burner sat a stove lid that had to be removed with a "lifter" before lighting the burner. The lifter was a metal handle inserted into a notch recessed in the stove lid.

I liked the stove so much because at about age ten, I had learned to bend and blow glass tubing. I spent many enjoyable afternoons at it, but one afternoon I learned a valuable but painful lesson. Bringing my glass tubing into the kitchen, I lifted the stove lid with the lifter, setting it to the side of the burner, not realizing I had left the lifter handle extended over the flame. After lighting the stove, I bent a little glass, then noticing the lifter handle was in my way, reached to move it.

By this time the handle had almost become red hot, and I grabbed it firmly. At that moment, I heard the hiss of the lifter handle leaving its impression on the palm of my hand. The pain was excruciating, and I carried the evidence of my folly with me for many months.

Fire and Sin

Solomon uses the analogy of burning oneself to describe sinning. "Can a man take fire to his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Can one walk on hot coals, and his feet not be seared?" (Proverbs 6:27-28).

From verse 24 through the remainder of the chapter, he discusses sexual sins. The section warns a young man to listen to the advice and instruction of his parents in this matter. Their counsel will, he writes, "Keep you from the evil woman, from the flattering tongue of a seductress. Do not lust after her beauty in your heart, nor let her allure you with her eyelids. For by means of a harlot, a man is reduced to a crust of bread" (verses 24-26). Of course, these instructions apply in principle just as well to young women.

In verses 27-35, the subject changes to adultery. To paraphrase, as sure as a person who takes fire into his bosom or walks upon live coals will be burned, so will he be found guilty who seduces his neighbor's wife! Society understands someone stealing because of starvation. That debt can be repaid, but the sin of adultery can never be wholly atoned for. The spouse who has been betrayed can never be entirely appeased; the deep wound will never completely heal.

Sexual sins seem to have always plagued Israel. In Genesis 35:22, Reuben lay with his father's concubine Bilhah, an act that branded Reuben as unstable as water and cost him his rights as firstborn (Genesis 49:4). Numbers 25 shows us the result of Israel committing harlotry with the women of Moab. The result was a plague that caused the deaths of twenty-four thousand people!

David's lustful desire for Bathsheba led to the death of her husband, Uriah, and of their son from the adulterous union (II Samuel 11:1-12:23). In addition, it disgraced David's house, Israel, and God (II Samuel 11:11-14). As prophesied, David's concubines ("lesser wives") were later defiled (II Samuel 16:22), which played a part in the death of another son, Absalom, in his rebellious attempt to topple his father (II Samuel 18:14-15).

We can see the results of the sexual sins recorded throughout the Bible, but do we stop to consider the result of taking this kind of "fire" to us as a nation? What has it produced?

Pornography—available through every kind of media—floods the world. Unwed mothers are commonplace, filling our cities with fatherless children and costing the nation billions of dollars in welfare payments. Schools across the country hand out free condoms to students and teach them a sex-education curriculum that encourages "safe sex" rather than abstinence. Sexual perversions are commonplace, paraded down our streets and acclaimed as "brave."

Divorce caused by sexual misconduct is an everyday occurrence, resulting in shame, broken homes, and children without two parents in the home. Sexually transmissible diseases, such as genital herpes, HIV, chlamydia, gonorrhea, and

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syphilis, still take a tremendous toll on society. Abortion kills millions of babies each year. All these ills run rampant in our society because of disobedience to God's perfect law concerning adultery and its related sins.

God's Instruction

In His wisdom, God set the standard for human sexuality in the Garden of Eden: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). He intended this wonderful gift, a physical relationship between a husband and wife, to help bind the marriage in tenderness and love. Through it, children were to be produced, trained to understand and trust God as they grew up in His truth, marry, and complete the cycle again.

Satan, who cannot reproduce himself, sees the handwriting of his defeat on the wall, and in his hatred, he is doing all he can to bring humanity down with him. One of the first places he prefers to strike is the family, and what better means to its destruction than sex? Even in what we would consider "normal" marriages, the world's perverted influence can have an effect.

Knowing that in this end time Satan would be pulling out all the stops in destroying His plan for mankind, God recorded instructions in His Word to help us to fend off the Devil's attacks. As a church and as a nation, we need to return to this wise and trustworthy source for the answers we need.

The apostle Paul's pointed command in I Corinthians 6:18, "Flee sexual immorality" or "Flee fornication," as the King James Version says, is the soundest of advice. The farther away from temptation we are, the safer we are. When American soldiers went to Japan from Korea on R & R ("rest & recuperation") many would visit the red-light districts. One such area was just across "V.D. Bridge," an apt name. One soldier wanted to cross the bridge, and the girls from the other side urged him to cross as well, pulling on his arm. His buddies, knowing why the bridge was nicknamed as it was, pulled on his other arm. His friends finally won this human tug-of-war, but at first, the saved soldier screamed at them to release him so he could cross over. But as he moved farther away from the temptation, he thanked his friends for saving him from a terrible mistake.

How do we flee sexual immorality? More generally, how do we flee any of the sins and perversions that are only increasing in this end time?

Jesus explains the spiritual intent of the seventh commandment in Matthew 5:27-30. "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you, that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her, has already committed adultery with her in their heart" (verses 27-28). In effect, He stresses that the ball is in our court—we have to take action to avoid or handle the temptation. He insists that we deal as best as we can with the intent of His law and take proper steps not to allow ourselves to be trapped by sin.

How? He provides instruction:

And if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. (verses 29-30)

What is He saying? Are we to physically destroy the body's parts that offend? Of course not! He has already said that the mind is where the sin takes place first. Thus, it is the *mind* that must be changed. We have to get our minds "out of the gutter."

These days, most of us have ready access to lurid video content 24/7. Is watching that programming producing immoral fruit in your mind? Are we bringing the gutter into our living rooms? If it is, then to protect the mind, the lewd content has to go.

If alcohol is a problem, then do not allow it in the home, do not frequent the places where it is sold, and do not associate with those who drink. If handling credit is a temptation and problem, cut up the credit cards and set up—and stick to—a budget. If the problem is smoking, do not allow tobacco in the home and avoid places it is easily accessible.

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The principle is plain. Whatever drags us down and causes us to sin should be—*must be!*—put as far from us as possible. *That is our physical responsibility!*

Another Step

Satan is satisfied with the condition of our nation and the world. It is easy for him to keep the pot stirred with most people, but we are trying to overcome it and obey God. Because we are working to counter all his pulls and devices, Satan will tirelessly push our individual buttons to cause us to stumble. Thus, there is one more step, a *spiritual step*, we must take.

Whatever type of sin we fall into—"the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16)—we must go before God as we are told in James 4:6-10:

But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. *Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.* Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up. (Emphasis ours.)

Overcoming sin is a difficult task, requiring tremendous effort on our part. It will not go away just because we wish it. We are so accustomed to the lifestyle of this world that we do not see the dangers accompanying sin. The problem with taking fire to ourselves is that we cannot see the flames or feel their heat until it is too late. Because this fire is not evident to the eye or the sense of touch, we can be easily burned by it.

In the entertainment and media available today, we do not see, for the most part, the penalties produced, the wretched results of sin. Thus, we do not recognize the urgent need to put out or take control of the temptation or sin affecting our minds (Ecclesiastes 8:11-13).

This present, evil world appears to be perched on the edge of the fifth seal (Revelation 6:9), and time is short. If so, we have limited time to do the work of putting sin out of our lives. An old fishing saying we hear occasionally, "Are you going to fish or cut bait?" means "Are you going to be part of the action or sit on the sidelines?" It is time for all of us to "fish."

The scar left by the lifter on my right hand has long faded, and the hand looks fine, except it now looks considerably older. Looking back over my life, I wish the other "burn" scars were also gone. I wish I had seen the unseen fire and its dangers as I was growing up.

Though we all have scars, the deeds that produced them are forgotten by God upon our repentance. The scars that remain are for us to remember the lessons that we learned from being burned.

We who are the called at this end time can see the fire that can truly burn and destroy us, but seeing is not enough. *We must take action.* We must overcome in the areas we "miss the mark." As we do our part and stay close to Him, be of good cheer, remembering that God will step in and do His part to quench the fire.

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Have a Great Sabbath Everyone!

Waxing Cold

(Copyright 2023) by John Reiss (Charlotte, North Carolina)



I confess that I have a problem. Perhaps you have the same one.

- » When I see a retired police chief shot and killed while protecting a friend's business from looters, I get angry.
- » When I see people rioting, burning, and looting businesses in my hometown, I get angry.
- » When I see people trespassing onto a private street and threatening homeowners with harm and violence, I get angry.
- » When I see people chanting and screaming at diners as they are merely trying to enjoy their dinners, I get angry.
- » When I see people stupidly and blindly calling for the defunding of the police, even as rioters are throwing numerous projectiles at their vehicles, I get angry.
- » When I see protestors blocking the entrance to an emergency room, where emergency personnel brought two ambushed, critically injured police officers, cowardly shouting, "We hope they die!" I get very angry!

In Matthew 24:3, the disciples ask Jesus Christ: "Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of Your

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coming, and of the end of the age?” In the course of His answer, in verse 7, Jesus speaks of nation rising against nation. “Nation” is a translation of *ethnos* (*Strong’s #1484*), which means “a tribe, nation, people, group.” We can understand Jesus’ words to mean one ethnic group fighting another. It can describe national wars or cultural or racial strife. It is different from “kingdom against kingdom,” where our Savior uses the word *basileia* (*Strong’s #992*), which means “the region or country governed by a king.”

Over the past few years, cultural and racial strife has rocked this nation, especially its cities. We have seen the very foundations of our society attacked, and they are tottering. How much more additional stress can they take?

Love Among Chaos

If we read just a bit further, Jesus prophesies, “And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold” (Matthew 24:12). In some areas of the nation, chaos and anarchy already approach the level of “lawlessness,” and the exasperation of many Americans is putting them on the verge of fulfilling the second half of this prophecy.

“Lawlessness” is from the Greek word *anomia*, which denotes a condition of contempt and violation of law. With all the uprisings, crimes, and hostility continuously populating our newsfeeds, we are witnessing an abundance of this prophesied lawlessness nearly every day.

In this verse, the Greek word for love is *agapē*, godly love, the kind of love God expresses toward us and which we are to learn to express toward both Him and each other. Jesus is warning us that many of His called people—the only humans who can possess the love of God in their hearts because of the Holy Spirit in them (Romans 5:5)—are passively letting love grow stone-cold through feelings of frustration and hopelessness! *The Contemporary English Version* translates this verse, “Evil will spread and cause many people to stop loving others.”

Despite how we may feel, we cannot let anger at sin and sinners get in the way of our responsibility to continue loving our fellow man. Doing so is a sign of returning to the carnality of our pre-conversion lives when we allowed our emotions to cause us to react to difficult circumstances in ungodly ways. Our Savior set the proper example by loving His potential brothers and sisters so much that He gave His life for every one of us “while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8)!

We must overcome these feelings of resentment and not let the pervasive spread of hatred and evil in this world derail us from our divinely assigned responsibilities. Jesus states in the next verse, “But he who endures to the end shall be saved” (Matthew 24:13). Only those who patiently continue to live according to Christ’s teachings even amidst the most troubling times will enter God’s Kingdom.

But enduring through chaos is not something God’s people can do alone. This prophecy is a message to the church at the time of the end, to those who have the love of God because He has chosen to bestow His grace upon them. A Christian’s responsibility is to reciprocate this love back to Him in obedience and out to others in acts of service. In this way, we strengthen our bonds between God and our brethren, giving us extra faith and unity to weather the stormy times.

Job One: Preparation

We do not need to be too concerned with the fulfillment of prophecy, particularly about the when of Christ’s return. We will never figure out the correct dates since they are under the Father’s control (Matthew 24:36). We may not even be able to determine the right players beforehand! Trying to know these things beforehand is futile and time-wasting. Instead, what the Bible teaches is to be ready. Jesus counsels His disciples in Matthew 24:44, “Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

Being ready entails, in part, meeting life’s daily challenges now to overcome our faults and grow in righteous character. That is job one: preparing ourselves to live like God in His Kingdom. We need to consider some scriptures that tell us what we can do to equip and prepare ourselves (see Revelation 19:7), no matter what befalls in our rapidly decaying society.

First, we must be in constant contact with our heavenly Father and Elder Brother. The *New International Version* of Jude 21 states this clearly: “. . . keep yourselves in God’s love [*agapē*] as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.”

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Romans 12:9-11 in the *English Standard Version* (ESV) expands the admonition to live in love:

Let love be genuine. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in Spirit, serve the Lord.

The Greek word underlying “fervent” is *zeō*, which at its root means “to boil; seeth.” The apostle Paul instructs us in this passage to “run hot” in using God’s Spirit to serve God and others at all times—even when the spiritual climate around us has gone cold. Fervent application of God’s way of life, lived through following the urgings of the Holy Spirit, will help us to prepare and endure.

Jesus tells the disciples in John 15:13, “Greater love [*agapē*] has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.” To God, that is how far our loving service should go for our brethren. It does not have to mean that we literally die for them, though it could. The idea here is similar to what Paul writes in Romans 12:1 about being “a living sacrifice.” That is, we lay aside what we may want to do at a given time to help a brother or sister in his or her time of need.

What if we lack that kind of selflessness? The apostle John writes in I John 4:8 that “God is love [*agapē*].” He is its Source, and we must study Him and go to Him for help in growing in it.

Additional Aspects of Godly Love

Second, Jesus commands us in Matthew 5:16, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” Many people think of good works only as giving to charity or doing some sort of free public service like working in a soup kitchen. However, one of the most overlooked good works is submitting to and obeying God and His law. We should do so, not to try to earn salvation—that is through God’s grace—but to align ourselves with God and His righteousness (see Matthew 6:33).

There are other benefits to obedience that most never consider. For instance, when we faithfully obey God out of love for Him, we set a good example for others, modeling for them the right way to live. John writes in I John 5:3, “For this is the love [*agapē*] of God, that we keep His commandments.” Obeying His commandments shows both our love for Him and others.

Third, we will show love toward others if we act with patience and forbearance when confronted. Wise Solomon counsels, “A soft answer turns away wrath” (Proverbs 15:1). In the New Testament, Paul instructs us in simple terms on this point: “Repay no one evil for evil” (Romans 12:17). He gives a fuller explanation in verses 18-19:

If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.

Study the Gospels with a focus on how our Savior reacted—or did not—when His adversaries attacked Him. The apostle Peter records that He did not seek to defend Himself even under unjust suffering (I Peter 2:21-23).

What can we do if we come under attack? In a couple of places in his epistles, Paul advises God’s people to sing hymns (see Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Paul and Silas sang hymns when falsely imprisoned: Acts 16:25). It is such a simple thing, but it works! We can use them when verbally assaulted to keep us in the right, godly frame of mind. Choose a simple, memorable one with appropriate words for such a situation, perhaps the first song in our hymnal, “Blessed and Happy Is the Man,” from Psalm 1. It reminds us of our blessed position as God’s elect and points us toward righteous behavior.

Finally, go the extra mile when faced with opposition or even persecution. Jesus commands us to do so in His Sermon on the Mount, advising us “not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. . . . And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two” (Matthew 5:39, 41). Such humble compliance is not easy to do, but our Savior recommends it to diffuse the adverse situations Christians are likely to face, especially as the end nears.

In Romans 12:14, Paul advises the same: “Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse.” He picks up this thought in verses 20-21:

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Therefore

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
If he is thirsty, give him a drink;
For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.”

Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

Peter makes a similar statement in I Peter 3:9-12 (*New Living Translation*):

Don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate with insults when people insult you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God has called you to do, and He will grant you His blessing. For the Scriptures say,

“If you want to enjoy life
and see many happy days,
keep your tongue from speaking evil
and your lips from telling lies.
Turn away from evil and do good.
Search for peace, and work to maintain it.
The eyes of the LORD watch over those who do right,
and His ears are open to their prayers.
But the LORD turns His face
against those who do evil.”

Acting in kind will do nothing to help the situation. Applying “tough love” to our adversaries rarely reproduces Christ's example. Instead, behave with the love of God and do good. If we work toward a peaceful solution and display Christian virtue, God will hear our prayers and act on our behalf.

Foundations Being Destroyed

It is almost as if King David was reading the opening verses of Matthew 24 when He mused in Psalm 11:3, “If the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?”

The answer is that we must do the same thing that the righteous have always done: Be righteous. Obey God's commandments. When adversity comes, we cannot allow ourselves to abandon all we have learned as Christians and fight back with the carnality we worked so hard to overcome. As the apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 4:26, we can “be angry, [but] not sin.” We cannot let exterior turmoil derail our progress toward the Kingdom of God.

Despite its seeming pessimism, Matthew 24:12 actually provides some hope. It reads, “. . . the love of *many* will grow cold” (emphasis ours). Jesus says “many,” not “all.” Some people's love will not grow cold; some will remain faithful. What can we do to be part of the lesser number, keeping our godly love alive?

Most of all, we must keep our focus on Jesus Christ and His example of loving behavior and strive to imitate it. In this way, as Paul writes in II Timothy 1:6 (ESV), we will “fan into flame the gift of God” and keep it boiling hot. If we do these things, the pervasive spread of evil will not cause us to stop loving others.

See John Reiss' other articles at:

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Jesus said, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32). To be a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ, rather than one in name only, requires abiding in his word. That's what Jesus Christ himself said. That means a real disciple of Christ, a real Christian, is one who abides in — continues in, or lives according to — the teachings of Christ. And one of the teachings of Christ is that we are to live "by every word of God" (Luke 4:4).

Is it your desire to be a true disciple of Jesus? If so, it's absolutely vital that you abide not in some particular organization of men, or a religious tradition imposed by the flawed teachings or reasonings of men, but in God's word, correctly understood.

Jesus prayed shortly before his death concerning his disciples, "They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:16-17). The word of God is the truth. And the truth of God's word is what sanctifies his disciples. To sanctify (Greek: *hagiazō*) means to "consecrate or set apart persons or things to God" (Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* on John 17:17).

In John 4 we find recorded a conversation Jesus had with a woman of Samaria, a region which had been inhabited by a portion of Israel before the Assyrian captivity. When the Assyrians took Israel into captivity in the eighth century B.C., they brought in Gentile peoples from other areas — primarily Chaldean cities or regions — to settle the land alongside the remnant left in Israel (2 Kings 17:24; Ezra 4:7-10; cf. 2 Chronicles 34:9, 21). The preponderance of both Biblical and secular evidence indicates that only a relatively small number of Israelites was left in the land after the Assyrian captivity.

Inhabitants numbering 27,290 were recorded as being deported after a three year siege from the city of Samaria by Sargon II in an Assyrian inscription (*Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, Daniel David Luckenbill, ed., University of Chicago Press, 1926, vol. 2, p. 26). Some have carelessly assumed that this was the total number deported from among the Israelites by the Assyrians. But this assumption is not supported by Scripture nor by Assyrian records. In reality those were but a small portion of the total numbers carried away, killed or driven out of Israel during successive campaigns spanning decades. An Assyrian inscription records the boast of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III, "The land of Bit-Humria [house of Omri, Israel] ... all of its people, together with their goods I carried off to Assyria. Pakaha [Pekah], their king they deposed and I placed Ausi' [Hoshea] over them as king" (*Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 1, p. 293; cf. 2 Kings 15:29-30). Among other Assyrian kings who subjugated Israel, Sargon II boasted that he plundered and devastated Samaria and the whole land of Israel, and carried Gentile peoples in to settle their land (*Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 2, pp. 2, 7, 26, 40, 46, 51, 61; 2 Kings 17:6, 18, 24; 1 Chronicles 5:26; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 9.14.1). For evidence indicating Sargon II and Sennacherib were two names for the same king, see [A Revised History of the Era of King Hezekiah of Judah and its Background](#), Damien Mackey, p. 166; also "[Mackey's Thesis Assessment After Ten Years \(2007-2017\)](#)". (Both documents are available at the time of this writing at www.academia.edu).

The new population, called Samaritans, or Cutheans, remained predominately Gentile, though at times they claimed to be descended from Joseph (Matthew 10:5; *Antiquities*, 9.14.3). Later, a number of Jews migrated to the area (cf. *Angus-Green Bible Handbook*, p. 598). The Gentiles who moved into the area of Samaria brought with them their pagan gods, and their religions were blended with the apostate Yahweh worship of Israel (cf. 2 Kings 17:21-41), and later, elements of Jewish Temple worship.

Over time, due to various reforms, many of the more readily apparent pagan influences were suppressed, and in many respects Samaritan practices eventually resembled those of the post-exilic Jews. For example, they kept the weekly Sabbath and the annual feasts commanded in the Law. But there were significant differences, as well.

Under the veneer of Mosaic ritual the old pagan sentiments appear to have remained strong and ready to surface at opportune times. When Antiochus Epiphanes instituted a persecution against the Jews in the second century B.C. the

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Samaritans sought favor by naming their temple after the Greek god Jupiter (*Antiquities*, 12.5.5; *2 Maccabees* 6:1-2). In the first century and later, Samaria was a hotbed of gnostic heresy. Of the heretic Simon Magus, it was said by Justin Martyr, who was born in Samaria, that “...almost all the Samaritans... worship him and acknowledge him as the first god” (*First Apology*, XXVI). Evidence indicates the Samaritans, unlike most Jews and Christians in the early Christian era, used pagan icons in their worship (cf. *The People That History Forgot*, E. L. Martin, ch. 4). Scripture condemns the use of idolatrous images in the worship of God and condemns the blending of heathen customs in such worship (Deuteronomy 4:15-19, 23-26; 5:7-9; 12:1-4, 29-32).

The Samaritans of Jesus’ day claimed to worship the same God as the Jews, and used as their Scriptures their own version of the Pentateuch. Nevertheless, their worship was marred by false practices and superstitions. The Jews at the time of Jesus’ sojourn in the flesh regarded the Samaritans as a mixed race of apostates (Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, p. 354). Jews usually avoided contact with Samaritans, and there was deep animosity between the two peoples (cf. Luke 9:52-53; John 4:9).

Jesus, knowing the flaws in both the prevailing religion of the Jews and that of the Samaritans (cf. Matthew 16:6, 11-12; Mark 7:6-13), told the Samaritan woman, “...the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him *must* worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24, emphasis added).

Abiding in the truth, God’s word, separates God’s people, God’s Church, from the world (John 8:31; 17:14, 16-17). So, if we are to be genuine Christians, if we are to indeed be truly a part of God’s Church, we each, individually, and we as a Church must abide in God’s word.

That means our conduct, our teachings and practices must conform to God’s word. Not only our identity as genuine Christians, but salvation itself hinges on abiding in God’s word.

Why would I say that salvation hinges on abiding in God’s word?

- (1) James wrote, “Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness [i.e., repent], and *receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls*. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:21-22, emphasis added). The implanted word is able to save — if you do it.
- (2) In Ephesians 2:8 we are told that we are “...saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.” But in Romans 10:17 we are told, “...faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” So, a key to *acquiring saving faith* is *hearing the word of God*.
- (3) In Colossians 1:27 we find the phrase, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” In other words, Jesus Christ dwelling in us is the foundation of our hope of being resurrected into the same glorified state that he now enjoys. And the key to Christ dwelling in you is to keep his word.

Jesus said, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (John 14:23; see also John 14:21, [24](#)). Note that keeping God’s commandments — his word — is also the key to having and using the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-17).

As we saw earlier, true Christians are those who believe and keep God’s Word (2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 John 2:5; 2 John 1:9).

- (4) In order to thrive we must bear spiritual fruit, and the key to bearing spiritual fruit is abiding in Christ, and letting his words abide in us (John 15:1-8).

All sorts of spiritual benefits flow from abiding in the word of God.

God’s word is “light.” As light enables one to walk a sure path, the Bible is a sure guide to conduct that produces happiness and avoids pitfalls which tend toward catastrophe. “Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).

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One who obeys the word of God can be confident that he is following a sound and proven path. God’s word not only comes from the source of infinite wisdom, but it has met the test of time, and it is applicable not just to a particular time and place and people but is valid for all ages, and all peoples everywhere. “As for God, His way is perfect; The word of the Lord is proven; He is a shield to all who trust in Him” (2 Samuel 22:31). “The entirety of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever” (Psalm 119:160).

If your steps are directed according to God’s word, iniquity shall not rule you. “Direct my steps by Your word, And let no iniquity have dominion over me” (Psalm 119:133). It equips you for every good work (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

The word of God is food for the spirit. “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4; cf. Hebrews 5:12-14). Just as we cannot continue to thrive and live without physical food, we will wither and eventually die in a spiritual sense if we neglect the spiritual food of God’s word. Desire the milk of the word that you may grow (1 Peter 2:1-2). Abiding in God’s word will enable you to thrive spiritually, to develop, grow and be changed more and more into the likeness of Christ.

Abiding in God’s word is a simple concept, it’s not difficult to understand at all. Essentially it simply means to keep God’s word, to live by it. However, mankind throughout history has shown itself unwilling or unable to abide in God’s word. Why is this?

A big part of the answer is that human beings have tended naturally to resist the word of God. Israel in the wilderness is a good example (Hebrews 3:7-8, 12). If you resist God’s word, if you harden your heart to it, it will not have the effect of helping you to grow and change, and you will place your salvation in jeopardy.

Most of the Jewish leaders of the time of Jesus’ sojourn on earth did not have God’s word abiding in them because they did not truly believe it (John 5:38-39, 45-47). They put their own traditions ahead of God’s word, making it of no effect (Mark 7:6-13). Mankind in general has done the same thing down through the ages, and this pattern continues among most today, even those calling themselves Christians.

However, you can succeed where others have failed. God told the Israelites whom he had led to the land he had promised them, “the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it” (Deuteronomy 30:14). They were given a clear choice and encouraged to make the right choice to receive the many benefits available to them (Deuteronomy 30:11-20). We, also, must choose where to set our minds, and how to conduct ourselves (Colossians 3:1-16).

You may say, “But it takes God’s Spirit to obey his word.” Yes, it does, but to those who repent and show a willingness to truly obey his word God will give his Spirit (Proverbs 1:23; Acts 5:30-32).

Following are three specific steps that will enable you to abide in God’s word.

(1) Hear the word of God. To walk in God’s word we must first hear it, and not only hear it but receive it as the word of God and be willing to be taught (John 6:45).

Israel was given many opportunities to hear God’s word. Prophet after prophet was sent to them to testify and call them to repentance, yet they refused to hear (Nehemiah 9:29; Isaiah 28:12; Zechariah 7:9-13).

The Jewish leaders also refused to hear Jesus’ words. “He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God” (John 8:47).

Who is of God — and of the truth — hears God’s words (John 18:37). “We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (1 John 4:6).

Note that the way to tell where the true Spirit of God is working is in whether God’s word is truly heard.

Scripture is often twisted and perverted to support error (2 Peter 3:14-17). Rather than allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture, people often read their own ideas into Scriptural passages. As a result, false concepts become embedded in

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their minds, and the minds of others who may be subject to their influence. Yet, Scripture says, "no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Peter 1:21).

We must learn to correctly understand the Scriptures (2 Timothy 2:15). Never build a doctrine on one or two obscure or ambiguous Scriptures. Use Scriptures with clear meanings to interpret ambiguous or obscure Scriptures. Go to all the Scriptures on a subject, studying diligently, and allowing Scripture to interpret itself (Isaiah 28:9-10). "Theology is the whole meaning of Scripture — the sense taught in the whole of Scripture, as that sense is modified, limited, and explained by Scripture itself" (*Angus-Green Bible Handbook*, p. 201). "It has often been said that the best commentary on Scripture is Scripture itself. Nowhere is this more true than in Hebrew word studies. The best method for determining the meaning of any Hebrew word is to study the context in which it appears" (*Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Thomas Nelson, 1985, p. xvi).

Follow the example of the Bereans, who were receptive to truth, yet did not gullibly swallow everything they were told, but "searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). For any teaching to be considered authoritative, it must be not the product of human imagination, rationalization, or speculation, but rather, in full accord with a sound understanding of Scripture.

(2) Believe the word of God.

The Israelites heard God's word, but did not believe it (Hebrews 3:15 – Hebrews 4:2).

Believing the gospel, the word of God, is necessary for salvation (Mark 16:15-16; John 12:46-48).

(3) Obey God's word.

Obedience is the test of genuine faith (Acts 7:37-39; Hebrews 11:8; Romans 16:25-26; verse 26, "of faith," as in the KJV, is the correct translation).

Salvation is given to those who obey God (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; 1 Peter 4:17; Hebrews 5:9-10; Revelation 22:14).

Immerse yourself in God's word through daily Bible study. Meditate on it often. Strive every waking moment to put it into practice.

If you can learn to carefully obey God's word it will change your life. It has the power to heal and preserve us. By relying on and abiding in God's word we have access to God's power in this world and in the world to come. Study God's word, abide in it, let it shape and mold your thoughts and actions. If you do that you can be spiritually whole, and you will share the rewards of its promises forever in the Kingdom of God.

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See Rod Reynolds' other articles at:

[Reynolds, Rod – The "New" Church of God Messenger \(church-of-god-bismarck.org\)](http://church-of-god-bismarck.org)

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Thank You Everyone!

A Truth About Revelation 2 and 3

(Copyright 2023) by John W. Ritenbaugh (Lancaster, South Carolina)



Among the best-known and strongest beliefs held by those who left the Worldwide Church of God during its doctrinal heresies is that the seven letters in Revelation 2 and 3 describe church eras. That is, they comprise seven long periods from the church's founding by Jesus Christ up to the present and continuing until His return.

But is this belief true? Is any part of it true? On what biblical foundation is this idea based?

Herbert W. Armstrong zealously taught what he believed to be true, and he was equally zealous in carrying out what he believed were his God-ordained responsibilities. Occasionally, some of his doctrinal teachings were found to be wrong or not completely correct, but he nonetheless preached those beliefs with typical, convincing fervency. It is difficult to find fault with that approach. When he realized he had been wrong, he preached the revised doctrine with equal zeal, which is exactly as he should have done. So, we cannot rely on his fervor in supporting a doctrinal position as proof of the truth. As he often said, "Don't believe me! Believe your Bible!"

Origins

The beginning of this idea of church eras in Revelation 2-3 occurred long before I was baptized in late 1959. As far as my awareness of it, it seemed to have always existed. It may have its origins in the Church of God, Seventh Day, the church Herbert Armstrong fellowshiped with before forming the Radio Church of God. Elements of it appeared in a church booklet, *A True History of the True Church*, first published in 1959 and authored by Dr. Herman Hoeh. I read it

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soon after its publication.

Jesus says in Matthew 16:18, “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” Undoubtedly, this verse played a part in the early thinking behind this concept. Yet, the church has misunderstood this verse. Its dominant interpretation has been that Greek *hades* always refers to “the grave.” This understanding is incorrect in this case.

What Christ is describing in this verse is an active, military-style engagement: a spiritual war between the church and its enemies. Since a grave is merely a receptacle for a dead body, it does not—cannot—make war. Jesus’ phrase “gates of Hades,” which Matthew correctly remembered and recorded for us, is a metaphorical expression describing the forces of evil, Satan and his horde of demons. They, not the grave, make war against the church. Christ asserts that the demonic forces of evil will not triumph over His church.

Jesus pictures His church—His spiritual Body—as dominating the warfare between it and the Adversary and his minions. We can be assured that Christ has already defeated Satan, as shown in the encounter recorded in Matthew 4 and Luke 4, and in His resurrection and ascension to His Father’s right hand in heaven. We will be saved by His continuing life (Romans 5:10).

Those of His faithful brethren, the elect, have nothing to fear about His willingness and His ability to overcome Satan on our behalf. Knowing that the church, with Him as its Head, is on the offensive ought to be faith-building.

Tracing Roots

We can understand the church to be a Family descended from Jesus Christ. Families do not just pop out of the ground; they come from somewhere. Every family has ancestors and ultimately, a founding ancestor. Our Savior is the Father, the Founder, of the church Family. (He—and we as His brethren—also have a Father in heaven but using “father” for Christ indicates the originator of a distinct people. See similar usages in Isaiah 9:6; Jeremiah 31:9.) As such, He is called “the second man” and “the last Adam,” which we often combine into “the Second Adam” (I Corinthians 15:45, 47). Just as all humans descended from the first man, Adam, all Christ’s spiritual progeny derive from Him.

It is common for families to search out their ancestors, those from whom they are physically descended, through whatever records have survived. Biblically, the Jews and Levites kept extensive ancestral records because God gave important assignments and responsibilities to certain families among them.

Such research shows, for instance, that I am descended on my father’s side from a German couple named John and Mary (Woell or Wells) Reichenbach, whose names abruptly appear in an official document, a marriage certificate, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1832. To the best of my knowledge, nobody has ever traced my roots any further back than that. They were likely my family’s original immigrants to America.

In a similar way, Dr. Herman Hoeh traced the roots of the Radio Church of God and later the Worldwide Church of God by seeking doctrinal correspondences between religious groups named in histories written as far back as 2,000 years ago. Information he found led him to determine that some of these groups were spiritual ancestors of the present-day church of God. Ironically, nearly all of this interesting information came from those groups’ enemies.

He found names like the Nazarenes, the Bogomils, the Paulicians, the Athyngani (Athingani, Athinganoi), Waldensians, Lollards, Sabbatarian Baptists, and many others besides. He also found the names of the leaders of some of those groups: Polycarp, Polycrates, Constantine of Mannanali, Peter Du Bois, Peter Waldo, Walter Lollard, Stephen Mumford, and two men whose first names only were recorded, Arnold and Henri.

Then, according to the periods in which those organizations and leaders existed, Dr. Hoeh fit them into the list of churches in Revelation 2 and 3. In this way, he constructed a chain of church eras, linked through the centuries by common doctrines.

Coexisting Churches

Because Christ is alive, the church continues its unbroken life from the time He founded it. But the question remains: Did Christ intend us to understand Revelation 2-3 through this “eras” method of interpretation? Obviously, the Bible does not

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say so explicitly. If it is a correct interpretation, it is because God’s Word often serves more than one purpose. A section of Scripture can have multiple applications. In any case, the “era” method of interpretation is neither the most accurate nor the most important one.

In Revelation 2-3, Jesus leaves a few clues about the letters’ primary application:

- » Revelation 2:16 (to Pergamos): Repent, or else *I will come to you quickly* and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. (Emphasis ours throughout.)
- » Revelation 2:25 (to Thyatira): But hold fast what you have *till I come*.
- » Revelation 3:3 (to Sardis): Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, *I will come upon you as a thief*, and you will not know *what hour I will come* upon you.
- » Revelation 3:10-11 (to Philadelphia): Because you have kept My command to persevere, *I also will keep you from the hour of trial* which shall come upon all the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. Behold, *I am coming quickly!* Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.
- » Revelation 3:20 (to Laodicea): Behold, *I stand at the door* and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.

Now notice Revelation 2:23 in the letter to Thyatira: “I will kill her children with death, and *all the churches* shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works.”

As the italicized phrases in the first five passages show, each an admonition to a different church, the similarity is that He mentions His imminent return directly or strongly alludes to it. Then, Revelation 2:23 more than implies that “all the churches” exist at the same time. Understood in tandem with the first five passages, Revelation 2:23 reveals that “all the churches”—all seven—are not scattered over long eras of time but exist together at the end time!

This understanding parallels the reality of the seven churches in the first century. When the apostle John wrote Revelation, they all existed simultaneously in the western portion of Asia Minor (today’s Turkey). Ancient Roman documents record they were all stops on the same circuitous mail route through that region.

An End-Time Book

John records Jesus Christ saying of Himself in Revelation 1:11:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,” and, “What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.”

The book of Revelation, like a letter carried along a mail route, was to be sent to all seven churches at the same time. It is unlikely that the apostle sent it through the postal system of the day but had it hand-delivered by one or more of his companions. This verse confirms that the seven churches existed concurrently in the first century.

The preceding two verses reveal a vital piece of information:

I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet . . . (Revelation 1:9-10)

In Greek, the words underlying “the Lord’s Day” simply mean “a day belonging to the Lord.” In the Bible, what does “a day belonging to the Lord” refer to? Revelation 6:17, a few chapters later in the same book, specifies which day it is: “For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” We know from the dozens of times a similar Hebrew phrase is used in the Old Testament that “the Lord’s Day” or “the Day of the Lord” is not a single day but a period of

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God’s judgment. Revelation 16:14 prophesies: “For they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty.” He is speaking about what is commonly called “the Battle of Armageddon” (verse 16), which occurs at the climax of the Day of the Lord, Christ’s return.

In Revelation 1, “the Lord’s Day” is not a recurring day of the week. It is the day of God’s wrath, the time of the decisive battle of God against His adversaries. So, he could write this book, Jesus projected John’s mind miraculously into the time just before His return, a time called “the Lord’s Day” or “the Day of the Lord.” That period of God’s judgment is still to come, perhaps soon.

We need to add Jesus’ detailed instructions to John in Revelation 1:19-20:

Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this. The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.

Jesus tells John to record for posterity his visions of the past, the present, and the future, that is, during the Lord’s Day. Our Savior’s focus in his doing this, however, is on what He speaks of next: the seven angels (or messengers) and the seven churches. Within the time element of the Day of the Lord, they provide the object of the book’s instruction. Jesus intended John’s writing—the book of Revelation—to be instruction for the seven angels and churches in the time of the Lord’s Day.

Revelation 1:13 shows the reader that Christ—here called “One like the Son of Man”—stands “in the midst of the seven lampstands [churches]” on the Day of the Lord, in that period just before His return. He is with, not just one church (Laodicea), nor with just two churches (Philadelphia and Laodicea), but with *all seven* at the same time. We can only conclude that all seven are in existence *right now*.

Models for Today

The entire book of Revelation involves the Day of the Lord, including the entirety of chapters 2 and 3. The original seven churches physically existed in the first century, but Christ used them—all of them, individually and collectively—as types and representations of what will exist just before Christ’s return. The spiritual attitudes they exhibited then are models of what exists in the churches of God today.

The book itself gives no indication that the seven letters cover eras, as seven successive stages of the true church. Instead, through the many centuries, one can find these seven basic attitudes whenever and wherever we identify a remnant of God’s true church.

In each letter, Jesus tells us to listen to what He says to all the churches (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Each child of God must evaluate himself thoroughly and honestly in light of Christ’s revelations in all seven letters and begin working on changing the flaws he finds. This instruction suggests that each church today has members within it that reflect several or perhaps all the attitudes Christ mentions. It is likely, however, that one of the seven attitudes will dominate a particular church.

A final thought: Despite the mixture of good and bad found in Christ’s evaluations of these churches—and some stern divine warnings—He still considers each of them His church. He expects each individual member to make the necessary changes in himself within the church where Christ, the Head of the church, has placed him. Nowhere does He counsel anyone to jump from one group to another. (An exception would be if one’s church group teaches obvious false doctrine.) The sense is we should work out spiritual problems and weaknesses where we are.

The real issue is not where one is but *what* one is. If a church member’s faith depends on being a member of a certain church group, his or her spirituality is suspect. Too much faith in certain members, ministers, or corporate bodies is deeply concerning. Our faith needs to be in Christ and His power to transform us into His image, not in an organization and its human flaws.

See John W. Ritenbaugh's other articles at:

[Ritenbaugh, John W. – Church of God, Bismarck \(church-of-god-bismarck.org\)](http://church-of-god-bismarck.org)

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Letters

Letter from James Steinle (July 11, 2024)

Thanks for all your hard work Laura and Darwin!

Holy Days 2024

Passover – April 23, 2024 (Observed at Sunset the Evening Before)

Passover/Unleavened Bread – April 23-29, 2024

Pentecost – June 12, 2024

Trumpets - October 3, 2024

Atonement – October 12, 2024

Tabernacles –October 17, 2024, to October 23, 2024

Last Great Day – October 24, 2024

Notes