

Christian Manual for Tribulation

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When things go well, and life is easy, we tend to develop bad habits based on the false assumption things will continue as they are. We dare not assume in serving Christ this is true. While we may well be facing the End Times, that is not the point. The world is on the verge of dramatic changes. With them may well come both natural cataclysm and social-political upheaval. At the very least, we should expect in the next few years serious economic hardship. This is not about The Great Tribulation, but tribulation in general. What would we do differently in the face of losing all the things on which we now rely? While my basic answer assumes shifting to house church operations, much of this I hope would be considered by mainstream church organizations before tribulation comes.

Were I in agreement with much of the current teaching about such things, there would be no need to write anything. So it is obvious I consider it flawed in one way or another, and would offer what I hope would be a corrective. By no means do I hope to start some movement, for such thinking goes to the core of what I believe is wrong. The churches of today, especially in the West, have become too deeply enamored with human methods and means, struggling in vain to do the work of God by their hands.

As I am addressing Baptists, much of what follows reflects that background. However, as I seek to recover the best elements of both the Reformation and the Early Church, the material should easily be applicable to most evangelical backgrounds. There are certain assumptions which are not discussed nor debated here, best summed up as the Five Fundamentals:

1. the inerrancy of the Scriptures
2. the Virgin Birth and deity of Jesus Christ
3. the substitutionary view of the Atonement
4. the bodily resurrection of Christ
5. the promised literal Return of Christ

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Introduction: Two Realms

The most tragic weakness in modern evangelical churches is a crippled understanding of the Two Realms. It's true we can find a book about that from a fellow named Augustine, but we can't forget he was a creature of his times. Many things he got quite right, but it was mixed with several mistaken notions. This spiritual schizophrenia was typical of his day, so soon after the last Apostle passed. We don't have space here for a detailed analysis, but the general issue is he unknowingly ends up using the underlying intellectual assumptions of the system he condemns. He suffered from the twisted outlook of Hellenism, as did most bright academic minds among Christians around the Mediterranean. So while Augustine did seek to explain the differences between the spiritual and the worldly, it was off the mark in many places because his complete frame of reference was off-center. Modern churches are even farther removed from the more ancient frame of reference of the Bible.

Hellenism is a fancy word drawn from the Greek word for the Greeks themselves, based on the old legends of Hellen of Troy – the *Hellenes*. It also is the name for a cultural intellectual tradition with which we associate the ancient Greek philosophers, in particular Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. If you really want to know the nitty-gritty details, you'll have to examine the differences in the field of epistemology¹. Here we note, in essence, the Hellenists insist man is the measure of all things; what man cannot logically reason out does not exist. To be reasonable, every logical step must be fully exposed for analysis. Augustine accepted this underlying assumption, as did almost everyone else among the Early Church Fathers, without realizing it came out of the materialist assumptions of Hellenism. This is virtually the entire scope of Western Civilization, in particular the intellectual culture.

It is all too easy to show how Hellenism slipped into the church, in particular as a shift away from the

1 See "East versus West: A Review of Epistemology," <http://soulkiln.org/ew-epist.html>

Ancient Hebrew intellectual culture. The first church in the New Testament was entirely Jewish, and most churches during the Apostolic Era included a powerful Jewish influence. That was a good idea, because the God of the Old Testament went out of His way to construct the Hebrew culture as the best means for revealing Himself. The problem is, by the time of Christ, the Jews had been Hellenized for at least a couple of centuries. You can read a more detailed explanation of it elsewhere². The problem Jesus faced daily was calling His listeners back to the Ancient Hebrew perspective. Hellenism led to a corrupted, mostly literalist viewpoint of the Law of Moses, which Law was thoroughly symbolic in nature. So while Jesus and His disciples taught a return to those ancient ways of thinking, it was no simple matter, and most Jews never quite made it. So most Jewish Christians brought this with them into the churches, and by the time of Augustine, the drift was significant.

It's not as if the Ancient Hebrews didn't understand purely rational human logic, but they knew it had limits. It could only address what could be proven to the intellect. That's fine if your spirit is dead, but Jesus came to bring spirits to life, because that's the only place the Holy Spirit could live. Once that happens, you have this input from God Almighty coming into your spirit, and it needs to trickle through into your conscious mind enough to inform your decisions. We have a fancy word we use to describe something about God: "ineffable". It comes from the Latin *effari*, which means to tell of something. The *in-* prefix negates the idea. God cannot be told, because the Ultimate Truth of all things cannot be put into human language. Language collapses under the weight of the task. Ancient Hebrew intellect accounted for this by adding a step in the process of analysis which was utterly outside the realm of reason, in the sense of human intellect. Jesus addressed this when He spoke of the necessity of using parables, and parabolic language. You can't describe truth, only indicate what it demands of you.

Nor should we suggest any Ancient Near Eastern mind was somehow superior simply because it was used to including a little mysticism. There are a whole range of mystical sources which aren't from God. But only a spiritually alive person can tell which is which. The good that comes from having an ability to work with non-rational, even mystical forms of logic, is the spiritual fertility of the soul. A mind raised up to Ancient Near Eastern ways of symbolic logic is fertile soil for the gospel truth, while the Hellenized mind is more like sterile sand. It will still grow stuff, but it takes a lot of work to change it (Romans 12:2) so that spiritual truth can be handled properly. Most Christians understand the necessity of faith as a non-rational element in their considerations, but they still cling so tightly to Western rationality, they keep trying to make faith reasonable. Let's get one thing straight: **Faith is eminently unreasonable in its demands**. If we expect to make grace and faith logical so lost minds can accept it, we are utterly without hope. Accepting faith requires a spirit come to life. God alone can raise up a dead spirit, and everything else is what man can do.

What makes it so hard for us is not realizing we shouldn't ask folks to be born again, because only God can do that. We ask folks to repent from their sins as the only path to the birth of the spirit. None of us is permitted to look into the Lamb's Book of Life, so we can never know the spiritual state of any soul. All we know is the strength of their repentance, and their commitment to continue letting repentance reshape their lives as demonstrated through conduct and words. We know there is a powerful correlation between living right and a living spirit, but we surely realize they aren't the same thing. One is a spiritual truth, while the other is an earthly manifestation. We operate along earthly lines for a divine purpose, but in the end, we can't possibly know of a certainty, in the same way we know facts on this earth, what's going on in the spiritual realm. We know spiritual truth in a way which leaves the intellect behind.

Let's examine some ways we have mixed the Two Realms in our ministries.

Politics in the Church

I've watched politics destroy a church. Not in the sense of internal politics causing a church to

² See "Western Civilization Is Not Christian," <http://soukilyn.org/bible/basics/westnoxian.html>

fracture; that's bad enough. Rather, I am referring to a church which became so engaged in secular politics she was no longer a church. The gospel message was compromised, the mission perverted, and all with the enthusiastic support of the voting members. It went to the point of temporarily hiring an administrator who was never there, but whose sole purpose in life was to give speeches and slide shows promoting a particular political agenda. Hiring him allowed him to pursue this political campaign until his books and articles began to sell, and his political foundation began producing enough money to pay his living expenses. Sure, he quoted Scripture the whole way through his many speeches, but not once did he share the gospel message, nor point to it. The church had become a secular political institution with religious overtones. It was not a lighthouse to the lost.

It is all well and good to seek a biblical understanding of modern political issues. The problem is far too many assume God favors their particular party, and anything the party supports is *de facto* the one and only proper Christian position. The assumption is their values are God's values, because the meaning of Scripture has been so twisted in their minds they can't see it condemns them. This is hardly different from perverting the vernacular to force political meanings into common words and phrases. At one time, to "discriminate" meant drawing a distinction between one thing and another. The ability to do this indicated an educated and fine logical mind. There was a time when "free market" meant there were no entry fees, and no one was permitted by sheer wealth to purchase a dominant position, nor use bribes to purchase favorable regulation. Just so, we have twisted the meaning of God's Word to support a political involvement He condemns.

With so very many Western churches involved in politics these days, often loudly proclaiming they follow God's hand in supporting sometimes contradictory policies, the genuine biblical position must inevitably sound radical. It helps if we first examine the context. It requires going quite far back, even to Genesis.

Covenants

Understanding why politics don't belong in the church requires understanding the history of Covenants. The original covenant between God and man is implied, but not clearly stated in Scripture. I call it the **Covenant of Creation** – if you exist, you are obliged to acknowledge God is your Creator. This is reflected in Genesis 4:26, "Then men began to call upon the name of the Lord." Obviously, this would include some effort to avoid offending Him. It incorporates the most basic sacrificial system, including blood offerings. Also note, Balaam knew God from this angle.

Next comes the **Covenant of Noah**, something widely recognized among Jewish scholars. It applies to all humanity, and particularly aimed at sinners. Taken from the Genesis 8-9, it cites God's promise to maintain a natural order, with predictable seasons. This is tied directly to the requirement to hold men accountable for murder. That symbolizes a much larger requirement to maintain a civil order. Civilization is defined as the set of habits required for large numbers of people to live in close proximity without killing each other. Allowing humans to become predators is unacceptable. No civil order, no natural order.

With Abraham we have the first clear enunciation of personal salvation. The **Covenant of Abraham** is more than just a promise to bring forth a nation from him. The substance of it was offering to Abraham such as would represent in his mind eternal salvation, in exchange for Abraham offering up everything he would have valued as a man. In essence, this is the same as Galatians 2:20. It is in the following chapter of Galatians Paul makes clear the promise of Abraham was not actually to those of his bloodline, but of his faith-line. Clearly, this same covenant still stands, and in Christ was merely renewed, given a clarification in the Son of God.

In order to create the proper setting for the birth of that Son, God gave the Children of Israel a covenant of law through Moses. This **Covenant of Moses** was poorly understood from the start. Paul continues in Galatians 4 explaining how the Law was never intended to be permanent. It was a temporary annex falling under previous covenants, having a distinct set of limits: that people, that time, that place. It was set to expire on the Cross. There is nothing of it left to fulfill. Natural Israel was never more than a symbol of Spiritual Israel, and the two coexisted until the final revelation of the Spiritual. At that time, the natural Israel would cease to exist. As Paul so plainly says, there is no

longer any distinction between Jews and Gentiles, as all must come to God through faith in the Son as a gift of divine grace. He connects it to the Covenant of Abraham by calling all those born-again “Children of Abraham.”

Law and Society

The Law of Moses was limited in many ways. When discussing the issue of divorce (Mark 10:2-12), Jesus made it clear Mosaic Law was a poor shadow of the actual Law of God. This accords well with the explanation in Hebrews, how the Tabernacle was simply a model of the Temple in Heaven (Hebrews 8:5). Even during the time when the Law of Moses was in effect, moments of clarity showed ritual purity was not what God really wanted from mankind (1 Samuel 15:22-23). Examine Leviticus and you’ll see very few violations were fatal; most could be dealt with in a proper show of repentance. Personal redemption was still a matter of faith, and the Covenant of Abraham still applied.

This is not to say the Law did not offer any benefits. Prominent under the Law was the promise obedience to its provisions would bring *shalom*, usually translated “peace.” Along with mere tranquility, this kind of peace implied much more: prosperity, protection from plagues, and political stability and dominance. In other words, all the things required for a society to remain stable and strong. This is the epitome of worldly comfort, what is now today often called “success.” Today’s American middle-class dream was offered to the Children of Israel as God’s response to their adherence to the Covenant of Moses.

Here we arrive at the crux of matter. If all you really want from life is success and happiness, you need but apply the Law of Moses. Not so much in the sense of becoming an observant Jew, but simply understanding the basic common-sense principles discernible in the Mosaic Code. You see, the Law was not entirely a new thing handed Moses on the Mount, but incorporated a great deal of lore already common to most Semitic cultures since the days of Noah. For example, tithing was well established before Abraham. The basic elements of *kosher* (dietary laws) were known to Noah. Pare away those items merely ceremonial, and one can extract good principles of daily life; it’s not that hard. Surely you can grasp the educational and self-fulfillment guidelines, the healthy diet, economic principles, etc. All you need is to ensure the society in which you live observes this lifestyle.

This is precisely what most big names are preaching today as their “gospel.” Sure, there’s plenty of talk about being born again, but the real crux of the matter is having a prosperous, healthy and happy life. These programs seek to make the local church a cultural center, the guiding light of social renewal. That it works so well for that purpose is what keeps it selling. It goes under all sorts of labels: Purpose-Driven, Seeker Sensitive, Victory Living, etc. Somehow, they’ve gotten the wires crossed, convinced this is what Jesus came to reveal.

However, they fail to go far enough in obeying the Mosaic principles, and are certainly avoiding the gospel of grace saving us from a sure damnation. Indeed, do you really want a good and happy existence? Will you settle for that? Then you must first take back the social and cultural dominance of your country. Further, you will have to more arduously enforce the provisions. Want to end sexual impurity in your world? It really is necessary to execute adulterers and perverts, or politics will allow them to demand full freedom. Don’t forget you must stop charging interest to anyone on your side (“the righteous”), but sock it to those with a differing social agenda (“pagans”). This places the balance of economic power with the “good” people, and impoverishes “sinners.” Naturally, this includes making sure everyone votes for the right policies, and the right people. History proves such oppressive measures are necessary, and they do work, but it’s not what Jesus taught.

The Real Jesus

Meanwhile, Jesus promised His followers the world would not give them prosperity and happiness. From the Wilderness Temptation on, Jesus made it clear He had no interest in ending hunger and poverty, spared no concern for keeping folks entertained and motivated, and certainly planned to avoid politics (Luke 4:1-13). His interest was revealing His Father’s real agenda, then fulfilling that agenda by dying on the Cross. How did our churches get all this backwards? What happened to a bold and blunt warning to folks they were sinners, and deservedly going to roast in Hell?

It's a matter of focus. There's nothing wrong with success in this world, unless it comes at the price of interfering with the gospel. There were dozens of examples where Jesus defied the typical understanding of worldly success. It was not a waste to pour exotic perfume on His feet. Fasting had nothing to do with cleansing the system, and everything to do with preferring spiritual strength over the physical. Not a single healing was based on simple human need, but on demonstrating His authority from God. He most often used that authority to shake up the established order in religion, not in politics. He made it clear investing in worship facilities could be quite pointless (John 4:23-24). His demands of the Rich Young Ruler (Matthew 19:16-22) were not about trading up to a higher level of wealth, but a wholly different kind of wealth. Broken homes (Luke 12:51-53) were to be expected, and social admiration and respect were considered unlikely (John 15:18-20) for those who truly followed Jesus.

That all of this ran counter to Jewish expectations for the Messiah is all too obvious. Even the Twelve, after the Resurrection, kept expecting Jesus to announce it was time to campaign for a restoration of the Davidic throne with Him on it. In the last hour in Gethsemane, Peter tried to use human means to preserve this dream. Had Jesus the least concern for breaking Rome's dominance, evil as she was, He could have called an army of angels to handle it (Matthew 26:52-53). Instead, He had already warned the Jews Rome's control over the common currency gave her every right to tax oppressively (Matthew 22:15-22). Righting every wrong was far from Jesus' mind and mission, as it was far from His commission to His followers, as well (Matthew 28:18-20).

It's not a question of who rules the world: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and earth." Rulers and laws are His problem, so leave it in His capable hands. Your calling is to focus on making sure you are empowered by your worship of Him, united in your love for Him, and committed at all costs to making sure the gospel is heard. None of this requires feathering your nest by making sure the world around you is loaded with /shalom/. Rather, it means being so powerfully committed to Him, and having so completely abandoned all human desires, hopes and dreams, no earthly power can prevent you sharing the gospel message. That's the real victory, the real success, real wealth, real peace, real power.

Christians and Government

Scripture does indeed teach us how we ought to relate to human governments. For the most part, we are uninvolved, with the same degree of detachment we face all worldly concerns.

Romans 13 Clarified

It's no secret the thirteenth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans has been much abused. On the one hand, those seeking support for oppressive regimes use it to bludgeon believers into a love affair with the ruling regime. For them, let's be clear the passage says "submit," not "support." On the other hand, the same passage has been read by others as describing the requirement of governments to ensure they are enforcing actual good. Frankly, this is not supported by the grammar. Twisting it around backwards to provide an excuse for active resistance to that same regime won't do. However, while I reject the most common understandings of this passage, I agree it's often taken out of context, at the very least.

The context begins with Genesis 8 and 9. Take a quick look, and you'll see where, after Noah emerges from the Ark, Jehovah promises there will be a predictable weather pattern. In other words, there will be a natural order. In return, He demands all humanity keep a civil order. The nature of His command calls for a government, and it must bear the sword, forcing those under its authority to obey on threat of death. Without this, we would see a return to the awful conditions which justified the Flood. Given there is nothing here of spiritual redemption, we rightly deduce this Covenant of Noah applies broadly to all humankind. As such, it's primary actors will be fallen beings, unredeemed sinners. In case you aren't paying attention, this is about regulating the behavior of those who don't love the Lord.

Back to Romans. Verses 1-7 pretty much echo this context of the Covenant of Noah. If you resist human government established under that covenant, the government can kill you. That's what governments do, in part because they are fallen. Paul is making a broad statement of principle applicable to all humanity, primarily those fallen sinners. Christians in Rome who knew their Old Testament, the Bible of that day, would recognize the reference.

Hidden in this is a sarcastic remark which would have made Romans chuckle. Then Emperor Nero liked to brag often he was the ruler "in whose hands the sword is idle." It was pure propaganda, and most folks realized it. Thus, "he does not bear the sword *idly*." Paul is mocking Nero.

In the process, he reminds the Romans they are forced to operate in this climate of violent oppression because there are so very many sinners in the world. Were it not for some harsh rulers bearing the sword, it might be well nigh impossible to get the gospel message out. Were it not for Roman hegemony, Roman Citizen Paul might not have so easily voyaged all over the Mediterranean with the message of Christ. Rome was useful, if unpleasant. And surely Nero, soon after Paul's letter, became quite the persecutor of Christians. Still, Christians had no business interfering in the process God left in place for sinners governing sinners. Pay your taxes and try to stay out of the way, because in the broad general sense of things, civil law is good.

Of course, in the previous chapter, Paul made it clear we do not live by that fallen viewpoint on life. We have a totally different orientation. We are not of this world. We turn worldly instincts upside down, because we care little for what belongs here. That is, Christians view all things in this world with a sense of detachment. All God's creation is a tool for the revelation of Eternity. So when you are abused, take no vengeance; God has a plan for that. He has a fallen world government system which He uses.

After describing that system, starting in verse 8 Paul reminds his Roman brothers and sisters they don't belong to it. They are stuck in it, and must respond to it, but it doesn't own their souls. It can take their stuff, and even their lives, but those aren't that important to Christians compared to the treasures of the Kingdom. Indeed, by our focus on following and obeying Jesus, we are relieved of our responsibilities under the Covenant of Noah, as far as God is concerned. Indeed, even under the Law of Moses, it was a matter of dealing with the things of this world. However, we are under the Lord of all Creation (Matthew 28:18). His power is love, and "Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." That "law" is a reference to both the Law of Moses and the Covenant of Noah.

If we keep our minds on obeying Jesus Christ, God does not hold us accountable to Him for whether we obey Noah or Moses. That's not to say consequences of bad law won't cause us distress, but we aren't required by God to please earthly masters when we have pleased Him. Take His viewpoint, and let go the part of you belonging to this world: "Make no provision for the flesh" (v. 14). We do what we must do to bring His presence to earth in our bodies. If that means breaking some man's law, we do so with the courage of His approval.

That means neither are we part of some resistance, nor do we slavishly obey civil law. We don't campaign for either side. For the most part, we are detached from such things. They aren't eternal, and what we see today is subject to change tomorrow, unlike the things of the Kingdom of Heaven. Stay out of politics. Oh, sure, go ahead and vote, but don't ever act as if these things matter in the long run. By no means should Christians expect to accomplish much by governing. True believers will be too merciful, and invite chaos. On the other hand, anyone capable of effective ruling will have a very limited opportunity to promote the gospel. You can engage one realm or the other, but not both.

Of Sheep and Goats

Now turn to Matthew 25, and drop down to verse 31. It's a parable, with an extended explanation added on, running to verse 46. Notice how Jesus follows the very Eastern pattern of blending the parable with the explanation, to the irritation of Western minds. Maybe that helps to explain why so very many people don't understand this part of Matthew. The parable is rather simple:

But when the Son of man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He shall sit on the throne of His glory. And all nations shall be gathered before Him. And He shall separate them from one another, as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. And indeed He shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats off the left. (vv. 31-33)

Indeed, the parable is just two sentences out of that. First, understand there is nothing inherently bad about goats; they were then, and are today, an important herd animal in the economy. But they aren't sheep, and don't provide what sheep provide. Sheep are generally less trouble for pretty much the same reason goats are put in a sheep herd: sheep are stupid. Goats are aggressive and independent minded. So you put a few goats in your herd of stupid sheep to pay attention to threats. Sheep will keep their heads down and eat if a quiet predator snatches one or two of their number. If the predator is noisy, they'll run away, but will pay no attention whatsoever where they are going. Goats will either attack a threat or run from it, and will run to a safe place. They are first to run, and where they run, the sheep will follow. This is a parable, a metaphor for the bigger picture. Jesus chose carefully. The very point behind using the image was to call attention to the very important difference between the righteous and the sinners.

The righteous are like sheep. Not in the sense of being stupid, but of being preoccupied with the sort of things Jesus discussed in the following verses. We, the Redeemed, tend to see the world differently than sinners. We see human need as an opportunity, a calling upon our very lives to extend His love and kindness. He uses us that way for a reason – love is the primary manifestation of His glory. We have a peculiar power to love the unlovely, the unlovable, and to sacrifice to Him the things we offer those in need. By our living His love for a lost and dying world, they become conscious of God, and learn something about Him. We have a focus, and we aren't much good at paying attention to other things in this world.

The goats are smarter, hardier, and don't really care about the sheep. Still, they are useful, because their focus on their own needs is a clue to the sheep it's time to do things differently. It may take the sheep away from the best grass, but also away from predators, or away from the cliff face. Sheep will stumble right over a cliff face. Shepherds know goats will tend to move out to the far perimeter of the herd, their blind spot, because they enjoy neither the company of sheep nor of humans very much. Goats will respond to the shepherd rather indifferently at times, but won't care to be left completely behind when the much more obedient sheep move to another pasture. They will fight with the rams from time to time, as even rams can be rough if aroused. Generally the goats will win because they are tougher, and have more effective tactics. They'll do things rams won't do.

God's goats are needed until the Final Harvest. When the End comes, they won't even comprehend why they can't be included in the sheep. They were just taking care of themselves as goats do. The sheep may not even realize just how much good they've done, not recognizing when Jesus called to them from the dark recesses of human misery. The Holy Spirit compels so mightily, it seems natural. How could one *not* care? Goats will do some good, only as a by-product of their self-interest. Yes, it's messy, but it's the only way things can work out; there have to be goats. We humans have chosen the Fall, and God's answer was the Covenant of Noah: There shall be a civil order enforced at the point of a sword. This will inevitably lead to attacks on God's sheep by the goats, but He is the One to bear the losses. Our focus is feeding on His Word and Spirit, and making more sheep.

In this world, we hold to a higher purpose: We are building a kingdom not of this world. The affairs of this world are in the hands of God, and we should hardly be interested in how fallen men run this fallen world. If we get too involved, we will get hurt, and hurt others greatly. Better to let the goats take care of these matters, however poorly they may do it. It's their calling, and God rules their minds for His purposes. We have a different mind, a different purpose.

"Vengeance Is Mine"

In our examination of Romans 13, we noted there is appointed by God a burden of responsibility on fallen humanity to provide a civil government. While the solution is hardly perfect, such government bears the sword for the sole purpose of preventing the mess Noah faced before the Flood. In the sense Our Creator mandated such a thing, civil law is "good." Jesus also explained it by the parable of

Goats and Sheep. Paul's explanation to the Romans comes in a certain context, which is found by examining the previous chapter, Romans 12.

For our purpose here, we note 12:1 says in part, "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." Whatever else you might make of that, you must include the idea our earthly existence is forfeit, a part of the covenant we make with Christ (Galatians 2:20). He owns your flesh, and all your worldly possessions. "Do not be conformed to this world" (v. 2) means we don't adopt the motives of sinners, so that we don't behave as they do. Instead, we adopt humility, especially among the Heavenly Family (v. 3). We understand that to mean accepting in Christians the variations we would never have to face in a family of mere blood kin (vv. 4-8). Just getting started on such a path requires serious attitude adjustment away from worldly ways (vv. 9-16). We show the definition of "goodness" to a watching world (v. 17).

Indeed, not just among our fellow believers, but to sinners as well, we should show the face of peace (v. 18). There are plenty of things God has commanded, and you don't have a choice in those aspects of your life. However, at every point where there is no specific command, we choose the path of maximum peace. That means yielding every place we can when our fellow humans push, as sinners do. Nobody is suggesting you must tolerate every threat and attack, but you must prepare your heart to withhold violent defense when God requires you wait for His hand. Absorb all you can. In the Law of Moses, this is reflected by the principle of "delivered into your hand" (Exodus 21:12-13). There are times the interests of the Kingdom mean someone else gets hurt or dies, but we should assume that's not typical. Surely, dear reader, you can think of obvious examples, such as defending your family, etc. Otherwise, let it go.

Most of all do not seek revenge (v. 19). This is so bluntly stated, there is no way around it. In the heat of battle, trust the Lord to show you what to do. Once it's past, it's passed. There may indeed be a compelling reason to file suit for recovery, but you had better spend some solid time in prayer with God because your loss is His loss, and His to decide whether it matters. Your entire net worth in this world is at His disposal, and you must accept up front He may well dispose of it all. Simply getting back at someone, in an on-going battle against an enemy is not God's way. It matters not at all who is right, but *what* is right in the Kingdom. Many of us will struggle over the manhood issue, but that's the world's way. Christian manhood is not stooping to the sinner's level.

Instead, be prepared in advance to keep on treating your enemies as if they were any other person in need (v. 20). The promise is the Lord uses such to change hearts. Would it not be far greater to win a soul to the Kingdom, and gain a new brother in Christ, than simply to get your just due? Our victory is not in getting even, but in overcoming their puny effort to provoke and cause us sorrow (v. 21).

Thus, the explanation in chapter 13 reminds you there is a system in place which is God's provision for sinners' justice, such as it may be possible on this earth. Sure, file a police report if you are victim of a crime, but otherwise stay out of it. If the police get the fools, fine. If not, it's not your problem. You are responsible for forgiving sinners for the simple reason they are sinners. You should expect them to sin. If they are fellow believers, the church stands to hear your complaint, and don't you dare take it to a civil court (1 Corinthians 6:1-11). The only other consideration is whether a professing Christian commits such an egregious sin, you are required by Scripture to regard them as lost. Thus, we are back to where we were before: Forgive them, pray for their salvation, but otherwise try to move past it. Commit that one to Satan for correction.

Nature of the Beast

In John's Revelation, "The Beast" is rightly associated with any human government, but especially those which rule over large areas and large populations.

The biblical model of proper human government splits defense and enforcement on the one hand, from more mundane daily human concerns on the other hand. Thus, your government would have both a warlord and a council of chiefs. There is no provision for a central government over massive collections of humanity. That's because the assumptions are no ruler of any type should hold sway over more than his own kind of people. That's not strictly defined, but a "nation" is pretty well

understood to be a rather homogeneous ethnic group, and any significant presence of some other ethnic group deserves their own chief in the ruling council. The choice of chief is mostly hereditary, but assumes a certain amount of demonstrated ability. The average male is assumed to be reasonably competent, but some are simply better at leading. Over mundane human needs, the social concerns outside emergencies, family and blood relations are the best protection, and diversity is a threat to human survival. It's fine to make peace across ethnic boundaries, and have cultural exchange, and biblical assumptions include a peaceful and loving co-existence, but living among your own kind is the very best lifestyle for the bulk of humanity. On the balance sheets of history, the dangers of being clannish are minuscule compared to the dangers of cosmopolitan mixing.

I make no apology for how backward that may sound to modern ears, especially Western ears. Feel free to give it all the ugly labels you like, but this is God's way. Western civilization is great for hard sciences, but it really stinks as a means to understanding life. As long as we can sensibly differentiate between Western inductive analysis about tangibles, and Eastern deductive analysis about ultimate truth, we are doing fine. However, we must never forget Western Civilization is a bigger threat to Christian faith than just about any Eastern culture. Thus, where the Bible speaks to, or makes assumptions about, human society, it is revealed as absolute truth, and we are obliged by our mere existence to accommodate that. A long and careful examination of Scripture shows modern democratic theory is baloney, based on a hopelessly flawed understanding of fallen human nature.

However, the greatest threat to human life and safety in this fallen world is centralized government of any kind. As a primary example, I will note the absolute truth no government exists without corruption. Give people power, and some of them inevitably dip their hands into the stream of organizational revenue for personal use. Even in the very best church organizations, at one time or another someone embezzled, and it most certainly will happen again. When power over larger and larger groups is concentrated into fewer hands, the corruption increases in scale and depth, and humanity will suffer needlessly. The greatest hope of tyrants is each man isolated from his neighbor, unable to unite against the tyranny. Even better is having each citizen alienated from himself. Anyone who is fully self-aware and self-reliant is a problem for oppressors. A country filled with shallow-minded children is much easier to rule and milk.

Thus, by its very nature, Christian faith is the greatest threat to all oppression. First, it demands of the individual more than mere rote observance of behavioral rules. Christ requires you to join with Him in keeping an eye on your very motivations and thought processes. He requires you to examine the very depth of human nature so you can properly reveal Him in daily becoming more like Him, and less like the rest of unregenerate humanity. Second, Christian faith demands we bond together across all human boundaries with a kinship which transcends mere DNA. Our "clan" is not one of blood kin, but of faith kin. This is utterly impossible without the presence of the Holy Spirit. Knowing intellectually man should be able to do this is no help when taking down the wall of human sin nature. No man, no device, no method of human design can do this. People cannot be reconditioned to offer much more than lip-service and an eternally guilty conscience for a failure which is unavoidable. Only the very real presence of the Holy Spirit can empower such love.

Fellow Christian, you who are truly regenerate in the Lord, we together are the one greatest threat to every human government. We are a far lesser threat to a tribal leadership among our own kind (one kind by Christ's blood, not by human blood), but a threat nonetheless to any lust for rule. When our hearts are on obeying the King of Heaven, no earthly king can threaten us sufficiently to force obedience to sin. If we do not realize human government inevitably runs to sin, we do not yet understand the Word. Serve Jesus first, and you will be the most free of all humanity, regardless of laws, restraints, even chains.

Reformed Eschatology

One of the things which made it easiest for me to step back from the Southern Baptist institutional church was their Dispensationalist heresy. While there is no official position required by the *Baptist Faith and Message*, there is a common assumption you must believe in Dispensationalism in order to

be a Baptist. I don't recall exactly when I realized I could no longer follow that lie, but it has been quite some years ago. I adopted the original historical viewpoint of Baptists, which is also the Reformed viewpoint, most commonly referred to as Amillennialism.

Amillennialism

You've probably seen the long shelf of books covering the typical Protestant studies of Last Things or **eschatology**. Most are some brand of Pre-Millennial, Pre-Tribulation, something or other. The broad nickname for it is "Dispensationalism." I am often amused at how much it takes to explain that position compared to the Reformed version. You won't find massive libraries on Reformation eschatology because it's really so very simple. Indeed, the only reason there is much at all about it is to discuss the perceived flaws in the other systems.

Reformed eschatology can be summarized like this: Jesus will come back someday, rather suddenly. He will draw us all into the air, calling up the dead believers first. Once we are assembled with Him, He will remake Heaven and Earth. He will descend with us to this new place and Eternity will have begun in the New Jerusalem (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:3). That's it. Noteworthy is Reformed folks insist there is only one Second Coming. When He returns, He returns; none of this business of returning twice.

Centrality of Covenants

The foundation for understanding a biblical eschatology is understanding the covenants in Scripture. For the longest time I was teaching the Reformed position on covenants without knowing it. At this point, it would be impossible to recall the source of my understanding, because it was internalized long ago. It has been my thinking longer than I can remember. Let's look at them one more time:

- The **Covenant of Creation** applies to all Creation: God's place as Creator must be acknowledged. It is exemplified by the statement at the end of Genesis 4: "Then men began to call on the name of the Lord." It stands as long as there is a Creation.
- The **Covenant of Noah** applies to all fallen humanity: Man is required to keep a civil order. Failing this, the Lord will not maintain the natural order, as seen in Genesis 8:20-9:7.
- The **Covenant of Abraham** is the first known example of personal redemption between God and a human. In Genesis 12, the requirements for Abraham equate to the image in Galatians 2:20: Abraham was to sacrifice all he knew, his entire being, to the Lord. In exchange, God promised to reveal Himself through Abraham, and provide what would amount to eternal salvation in the mind of Abraham. This covenant still stands until Christ returns.
- The **Covenant of Moses** was a temporary arrangement to provide the proper setting for the birth of the Savior. It was given to those people, at that time, in that place. All the promises have been fulfilled; there is no unfinished business. With the Cross, that covenant was done. See Hebrews and Galatians.
- The **Covenant of Grace** was a renewal of the Covenant of Abraham, an update in terms, a clarification. The basic requirements are unchanged. Those reborn in Christ are members of both covenants, in a sense.

Obviously, there's no room here for Dispensationalism. While Charles Alexander engages in a bit of hyperbole, he clearly enunciates the critical point of contention:

The error has taken different forms in our time, but springs from the same Judaistic root whose fundamental ground is that Jewish privilege and priority are perpetual and that the New Testament Church at best is only a makeshift arrangement of providence to tide over the time until the resources of a baffled and well-nigh impotent Godhead are assembled in sufficient force to compel at last a Jewish solution of the problem of redemption.³

3 From "Moses or Christ? Paul's Reply To Dispensational Error," by Charles Alexander <http://www.theologue.org/MosesOrChrist-Alexander.html>

Alexander draws his argument chiefly from Galatians. Being a Jew is of no significance after the Cross. They rejected the fulfillment of their Mosaic Covenant in the Messiah. Their advantages are quite limited to such as having a better background for understanding spiritual things, and being by covenant first offered this Grace. Otherwise, they are just another bunch of lost souls in need of grace. That they rejected the Messiah does not make them more despicable, for we all deserve eternal wrath. Naturally, the modern Nation of Israel bears absolutely no relation to Scripture, except as an accident of history.

Matthew 24-25

One of the biggest hurdles to breaking the spell of Dispensationalism is Matthew 24-25. Jesus prophesied Herod's Temple would be destroyed, to the point no two stones would remain vertically arranged. The Twelve asked two questions:

1. When will these things be?
2. What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?

Jesus begins by answering the question unasked: What bad things come with serving in the Kingdom? This is addressed to avoid confusing that answer with those for the other two questions. He warns in verses 4-14 what events do not mark His Return: "See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass" (v. 6). Verse 7 is a known prophetic phrase (Haggai 2:22) reminding them not to be concerned with the rising or passing of any human government, nor any natural disasters. That's simply the background noise of fallen human existence: "All these things are the beginnings of sorrows." The next few verses (9-14) are just the typical reaction of the world to people possessed of a single-minded commitment to a Kingdom not of this world. The Final Day will come after the gospel has reached all the world; the words do not necessarily imply immediately following that accomplishment, nor is it precisely defined what that means. It serves more to say, "It's a long way off. You need to be more concerned with your mission."

The specific prophecy of the Temple destruction we now know came true in AD70. In this (vv. 15-22), Jesus warns them to flee the city when they see the Romans violating the Temple grounds, no longer honoring the prohibition they supported while ruling the Jews by keeping non-Jews out. Some of those living at the time would need to heed this advice, and leave town, or face being caught up in the slaughter. That it was indeed a major holocaust is not in dispute. Because Christians would certainly be still in the city, Jesus promised the Father would make it quick.

For the sake of long-term Christian teaching, Jesus warns His return will not be secret. Many evil and deranged folks would claim to be Him, but it won't be like that at all. It would be something so obvious, no human could miss it. When He Returns, there won't be any confusion whatsoever what is happening (23-28). Verse 29 is a standard prophetic statement, not to be taken literally. Indeed, it was widely known even then: On the heels of any major disaster comes a "dark ages." Again, these aren't signs of the End, but just the nature of fallen human existence.

Then Jesus turns to the second question (vv. 30-31). He describes some unmistakable earmarks of His Return, something different from the previous discussion. Every eye will see Him and recognize Him as God, and angels will be visibly present. He cautions them to fix this in their minds (v. 32-33), to make sure they can tell the real deal as surely as they can discern the change of the seasons. The Second Coming is a distinct event, with no warning whatsoever. All these other signs mean other things. Then returning to His discussion of the Temple Destruction, He warns they would live to see it (v. 34), so heed the signs of this one event which is clearly forecast by signs. He reinforces that warning by mentioning His words are The Word (v. 35).

However, the Second Coming will not have any warning signs (v. 36). The Son Himself was not entrusted to know, so it's not possible for Him to tell. It compares to the Flood in that no one (except Noah) knew it was coming (vv. 37-39). It came suddenly. Using terms commonly understood to depict a sudden coming of judgment and wrath, Jesus describes a couple of scenes depicting victims snatched up by arresting soldiers (40-41). The ones taken are the guilty, and any other meaning was unknown to the Jews of that time. This will not be a convenient moment for anyone.

He launches finally into a call for faithfulness (vv. 42ff through ch. 25). The whole point of all this is *there will be no signs*. You cannot possibly predict by any digging and extracting details to establish a sequence. Get ready now, by obeying to the fullest extent. You can't know. You can't even guess. Don't try, because it's a waste of Kingdom resources.

Thus, Jesus answers the first question plainly, but warns them not to associate the second question with the same event. His mention of the Destruction of Jerusalem was quite consistent with His message of what really matters in the Kingdom: getting away from the ancient Covenant of Moses, getting away from the focus of One Place on earth (John 4:23). It would never again matter, because that covenant was about to be finished, fulfilled, completed, with no unfinished business. Every day He had tried to help break the spell of false understanding of His Disciples, teaching them the Temple would soon be just a pile of rubble. The old ritual framework would be dead, and being a Jew would mean nothing. Only those who walked His path would find God's favor.

It Is at Hand

A part of the Reformed position on John's Revelation is to see a pattern in what John describes. Having already been imprisoned for his apostolic activities, John saw the hand of persecution was only going to get worse. Thus, the primary purpose of the book was to warn his fellow believers, and explain the need to cling so tightly to the Risen Christ they could view the coming tribulation with a sense of detachment. At the same time, John describes the pattern of fallen human government, and the pattern of how God operates in the midst of that.

Thus, while we should certainly expect a final Harlot Church riding on the back of civil government, we should hardly be surprised when she shows up at numerous points in history, in the time between the publication of his Revelation and Second Coming. We should hardly be surprised when Satan seduces the Church, drawing her into a foolish alliance with civil government. We should hardly be surprised when Satan raises up men and women to very powerful places to serve him. We should hardly be surprised there are numerous anti-christs throughout human history.

In every generation of believers suffering some form of tribulation, many are seized by the assumption they are in the End Times. It takes only a quick check of Christian literature through the ages to see that. The current generation is no different. There are great piles of books seeking to prove how this must be the final period, and struggle through massive efforts to find hidden clues in Scripture to prove it. This, when Jesus pointedly said you cannot predict His Return by reading current events. It will most certainly be a complete surprise to everyone alive when it happens; the operative term often translated "soon" would be better understood as "suddenly."

That we are indeed facing a time of tribulation is indisputable. We most certainly do have a Harlot Church with the current wedding of politics and organized religion. We have several humans exhibiting traits of the Antichrist, fooling even the Elect. From this sham wedding will come a harsh and difficult time on everyone who does not bow the knee to Antichrist. There are numerous pointless wars, and rumors of more to come; we have massive natural disasters, and they come in clusters; we have a decline of civilization and every man withdraws into the self. But we haven't really seen anything, yet. It's about to get really rough, and soon.

We are again in John's audience. Yes, John's Revelation of Jesus Christ is for our time. I seriously doubt this is the Final End, but that hardly matters. The plan is the same for every period of tribulation. Indeed, it's the same whether we believe we are in tribulation or not. We are to detach ourselves from this life, this world, and all its passions, desires, dreams, hopes, etc. The only thing of any real importance is to lift up Jesus, to reveal Him by glorifying Him. Sure, the time of trouble is here, just outside the door. It's never been far away in the first place. That's the nature of this fallen world.

No Wars to Fight

By no means could I hope to debate with anyone. What's presented here is nothing more than an explanation. Take it before the Lord; if He does not change your convictions, keep what you have. A

very practical application of Reformed Theology is seeing no need to go to war with brothers and sisters in the faith. I teach and explain, but what you do with it is between you and the Lord. The most I can do is obey the command to limit pulling in the harness together with those whose convictions put them at conflict with my calling. Fellowship and worship may be largely unaffected. To the degree we can walk together, we must.

Doctrinal Issues

It was not easy for me to break my commitment to mainstream ecclesiology to seek an unjaundiced view of serving together with other believers. I should have done it long ago, but I kept trying to make it work. Finally, I realized I had already moved too far away from the mainstream path. Further, that path itself was moving farther in the wrong direction. Some of what follows is a matter of “we don’t agree.” Some of it is obviously more like “you’re wrong, and you need to change.” As always, I make no apology for my convictions, since I did not create them.

A Difficult Distinction

More than one theologian has recently suggested the richest field for spiritual harvest is the Evangelical churches of America. It’s not there are so many outsiders visiting churches; there really aren’t, for the most part. What they mean is far too many churches are dumbing down the gospel, and millions who believe they are saved are not.

This is more than just sniping and nit-picking between disparate theological backgrounds. However, that is precisely the objection raised by the targets of this implied accusation. What follows is Scripture. Reject it at your eternal peril. The gospel is not a mixed bouquet of different flowers from which you can choose your favorites. It has well-established elements, basic landmarks which, if any are missed, it’s not the gospel. There are many ways to outline it, and serious students of the Word will recognize when something is missing:

1. There is a Creator God who stands outside His Creation. Part of His nature is holiness, holding forth a standard of righteousness. He alone defines this righteousness.
2. The entire human race stands in opposition to that righteousness because of their inherent natures. Their spirits are dead, and unable to so much as desire righteousness, nor even understand it. Thus, all humanity stands under the eternal judgment of this God, bound for Hell. Nothing they do can please Him.
3. This God incarnated Himself as Jesus Christ, someone totally human, yet fully divine. He revealed as much about the nature of God as any human could grasp, then died a senseless and unjust death as a way to pay the penalty for the sins of humanity.
4. He rose from death by His own divine authority and lives now to provide the one and only path to redemption, to making peace with God. A human starts on that path only when God initiates the process. Taking that path means the human self must die to all human desires and concerns, and take up His human life in their bodies. This change is a genuine miracle, totally outside the power of human will, and is marked by an irresistible desire to obey God.
5. The balance of human life following that point remains one extended series of miracles. God Himself provides the enlightenment to understand, and the power to will, all the changes required in each life to begin a full realization of all the implications of living by divine concerns. This process is naturally painful, full of confusion and conflict, and will often make enemies of all unredeemed humans around us. Fellow travelers on this path are required to aid us, but will also be struggling themselves.

That’s pretty much bare-bones. You’ll notice there’s not much in there about success in contemporary society. Indeed, the opposite is assumed. If by chance a very large segment of those who share your cultural setting are on the same path to New Life in Christ, you still won’t have great

and easy success, but it's a little less traumatic. Jesus Himself warned finding a good spiritual consensus in any society was highly unlikely. He also warned most of the world would always be on the highway to Hell.

When a religious institution takes the focus off the desperate need of fallen humanity, the eternal doom of sin, and absolute necessity of the Cross to cancel that doom, whatever they're offering can't be called the gospel. What they do can't be called Christianity ("following Christ"). What they build can't be called a church. Of course, they always do call it those things, and so a great many are confused about those terms. Far too many ministries today aren't sharing the gospel, they are selling a moralistic brand of modern culture as a path to success in this world by it's own measures. What they offer is rightly called "conversion" as a term in psychology. However, it is not regeneration. It is not the thing Jesus described in John 3 as "born again." All the sincerity in the world won't change that.

It's possible the men and women who lead these institutions are genuinely confused, don't really know any better. I would suggest a great many are simply lacking in themselves a true regeneration. Say what you will about the Market-Driven Model of church management (Purpose-Driven, Seeker Sensitive, etc.), but in the majority of its manifestations, human sin is simply not mentioned at any point. Damnation is never discussed, and having a tough life is certainly the opposite of what they teach or expect.

As I've said before, I really don't care how you wrap it. Music style, clothing styles, facilities, technology, etc., are all externals. Pick what best fits your divine calling from God. However, if you leave out any part of what I've outlined above, I'll be first in line to condemn what you are doing as contrary to Scripture. The results of what you are doing will make your congregation a bunch of happy, fulfilled, successful... lost souls. That makes your church my mission field.

I Don't Grow Tulips

This is about the Calvinist version of the flower, the acronym T.U.L.I.P. For those who aren't sure what that means, let me quote the Wikipedia article on the Calvinist-Arminian debate:

Quinquarticular Controversy refers to the theological Calvinist-Arminian controversy that was addressed by Dutch Reformed churches at the Synod of Dort in 1618-1619. Quinquarticular (which means, "having to do with five points") refers to points of contention raised by the Arminian party in its publication of five articles of Remonstrance in 1610 and rejected by the Synod in the Canons of Dort, the essence of which is commonly referred to as the Five Points of Calvinism....

After the death of Arminius, his followers penned a petition... called a "Remonstrance," which highlighted five aspects of their theology: (1) election was conditional on faith; (2) Christ's atonement was unlimited in extent; (3) total depravity; (4) prevenient and resistible grace; and (5) the possibility of apostasy.⁴

While not a perfect record of the history of that controversy, it is accurate enough. I note here the article mentions the political wrangling where this debate took place under the Dutch government of that day. Essentially, the final conference where this was decided was not a free debate, but a stacked deck. Thus, Calvinists missed a rich opportunity to assert proper biblical arguments.

Here's the Calvinist TULIP:

T – Total Depravity of humanity: Humans can do nothing to save themselves, nor even want to be saved. There is no controversy here, really.

U – Unconditional Election: God elects based on His own pleasure, and no one has any choice or input in any way.

L – Limited Atonement: The Blood of Christ on the Cross applied only to the sins of those who were predestined to be saved.

4 From "History of Calvinist-Arminian Debate," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Calvinist-Arminian_debate

I – Irresistible Grace: No one who is elect can choose to reject God’s grace.

P – Perseverance of the Saints: Since we don’t save ourselves, we can’t lose ourselves by anything we do.

There are several problems here. First, this was a reaction to Arminian claims, which were presented as a list of five points, with only the T not in dispute. This essentially allows the other side to frame the debate, which hands them some victory already. Second, it’s a good bet neither Calvin nor Arminius would have signed off 100% on the arguments attributed to them. Third, much of the dispute was entangled in politics, which makes both sides wrong in that sense. Realize this reliance on government force is an unconsidered assumption held over from when the Roman Church was a quasi-government, a huge sin. Still, it cheapens the whole thing when men can’t trust God to defend His truth without forcing things at the point of a sword.

The greater error is using the Western analytical framework as the base assumption. One more time: Scripture is an Eastern mystical product, and it’s teachings assume that framework. It’s not so much the disputants applied inductive logic, but assumed the logical frame of reference rooted in it. Scripture is about the organic, narrative explanation, often largely symbolic in language, because the Truth defies human understanding in the first place. We are permitted by grace, via the presence of the Holy Spirit, to grasp only a relational understanding of God’s will for us. Any hint of objectivity introduced does violence to the essence of Spirit. The whole debate shows a determination on both sides to extract hard, precise and objectified principles.

My claim to the label “Reformed” simplifies things for those who don’t know me well, but close friends realize that’s not precisely accurate. Further, to be “Calvinist” here is used in the broadest sense of the term: a reflection of Calvin’s teaching. Such theological terminology can only approximate things from my viewpoint, since the truth in Scripture is tied directly to a less precise use of human language. As a net result, there will seldom be in my writing a reference to the TULIP acronym. To answer directly to that: T and P are bluntly stated in Scripture; however, U and I are more a matter of logical derivatives of God’s sovereignty, and are somewhat beside the point. L is even farther removed from direct biblical statements, completely beside the point.

Yes, I have read the Bible references used to promote each point, and a natural reading of Scripture from the Eastern perspective is the basis for my critique. In keeping with that Eastern framework, the terms used here are fuzzy.

I am not interested in debate, so don’t bother. That’s a Western obsession, too, and does no good for either of us.

About Booze

It’s pretty rare I drink any sort of alcoholic beverage. The reasons have little to do with the oddball obsession in the English-speaking world with alcohol. It has more to do with matters of taste and expense. I like European brews just fine, and I’ve had some really interesting wines there. Most of the stuff made in the US is simply nasty. Even when the makers know what they’re doing, idiotic regulations ruin it. It’s really hard to get the good stuff here, but even when you do, you still have to deal with the peculiar weirdness infecting our Anglo-American conscience.

That weirdness has a long history. During the Industrial Revolution, which started in England, mining coal became a major element in the national economy. Steam power (along with metal working) consumed vast quantities of the stuff. It was all about replacing muscle power with machinery. The one part of the process most labor intensive still was the actual mining of coal. Finding so much of it in places far from urban labor pools, mining companies built whole towns to house their workers. Such towns were miserable warrens, lacking all the amenities associated with older villages and towns.

Given alcohol abuse has always been a major problem in the lower classes, a means of escaping the ills of life, it’s no surprise they took to gin with a vengeance. It was potent and very cheap, and devastated the working classes of cities where it was sold. Where the working classes were clustered

unmixed in coal towns, the social climate magnified an already bad trend.

Colliding with this was the rise of numerous Christian sects unaffiliated with the Church of England. While there were a few Calvinist groups, it seems the Arminian groups were far more numerous. These religious groups wasted no time coming into mining towns and poor neighborhoods as with any other mission field. Most of this activity was Arminian, and some were simply theologically liberal. We note this is also around the time of the birth of Sociology as an academic discipline, which further removed the miraculous element of God's power. Blaming almost all the misery on alcoholism, there arose a powerful strain of prohibitionism in these religious groups. While we rightly have visions of the Salvation Army leading the way, this condemnation of alcohol as an inherently moral issue bled over into the Baptists and other Calvinist groups.

Thus, we have in 1732 the State of Georgia founded as a place to send those filling English debtors' prisons so they could start a new life, and the royal charter for the colony prohibited alcohol. While those debtors and prisoners never materialized, it is noteworthy respectable English, and therefore American, Protestant opinion held alcohol as a sin in itself. This idea has spread wherever English influence has.

However, for the most of the world, this idea is silly, even among Evangelical Protestants. We are left with a peculiarly Anglo-American neurosis, in which every effort is made to find Scripture passages to support what is "so obviously a teaching from God," of course. Sorry, but the Bible depicts only the *abuse* of alcohol as evil, just as one might abuse every other thing in God's Creation. Consider one critical fact from biblical history: storing the juice of grapes for more than a couple of days without refrigeration is impossible without fermentation. You can either ferment it on purpose and make wine, or you can let it ferment wildly and become poisonous. Here's another: Drinking any significant quantity of plain grape juice leads inevitably to diarrhea in most humans. Alcoholic wine usually does not. Thus, Bible stories make no sense if "wine" meant unfermented grape juice.

I note in my association with Baptists, I played by the rules while serving in churches. I never taught it was a sin, simply didn't comment on it. Starting around 2006 we have seen the issue rise again to the forefront in the SBC. While many voices for sanity are trying to shed this legalistic requirement – which in effect adds to Scripture a prohibition it doesn't support – there are many in leadership seeking to make the enforcement more harsh. Thus, it's not just a matter of assuming you agree; denominational leaders, even pastors of many churches, will be required to sign a statement including a provision they agree with the customary doctrine or be fired. Look for this to get uglier before it calms down again.

Making a Splash

When John the Baptist appeared in the lower Jordan Valley, prophesying the need for repentance, he employed ritual washing as a means of public awareness. While no one can prove John was a member of the Essene Community, it was obvious he was a disciple of similar austerity and concern for returning to holiness and purity. I doubt anyone was confused about whether getting wet did much for the soul, but it had been for quite some time a ceremony symbolizing a commitment to seek a clear conscience.

There remains a major struggle over whether the term in Scripture is defined as sprinkling, pouring or full submersion. Jesus commanded we should practice the ritual, and the New Testament church clearly used it to signify someone committing to follow Christ. For those who emphasize the symbolism of the Holy Spirit descending upon the individual, it makes sense to insist on pouring or sprinkling. There's not much doubt the Essenes practiced immersion, requiring those involved to get themselves into the water. Whether they then dunked their heads under or poured it over the top is hard to pin down. The Greek word *bapto* (βαπτο) itself quite obviously requires submersion, as it is a nautical term for a sinking ship – "whelmed."

I'm not sure it matters much between pouring and dunking, but I would insist on getting completely wet. Sprinkling a few drops is almost certainly derived sometime much later. It seems to have begun around the time of Constantine's ascension to the Imperial Roman throne in 306 AD. That so many older Reformation-based churches adhere to it reflects their having no reason to depart from Roman

practice. This is also true of the practice of baptizing children and infants. We have no record of the practice in the New Testament except a few occasions of adults. Insisting baptism is an extension of the Old Covenant practice of circumcision is hard to prove. Such an argument risks the necessity of echoing too many details from Mosaic Law, and this is rejected outright.

Thus, my house church will call for either submersion and/or pouring sufficient to be completely wet. The ritual is not about joining an organization, but a public notice one claims to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Only those able to make such a claim will be permitted. Readiness normally requires the witness of another, established believer, symbolized by helping the new believer get wet – either by doing the pouring or by lowering them down under the water.

Broken and Poured Out

The blood of believers flows mingled with that of the Savior in the celebration of His death. How sad it is something so simple has caused such controversy. I won't propose here to set aside all the debates and produce a definitive answer, only describe the answer I would use in my house church.

Call it what you wish – Communion or Lord's Supper – but the ritual meal in churches is extracted from the Jewish Passover observance. The evening before Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, He met with His disciples in a second floor private room. We understand this was the first time they celebrated in quite this fashion, and the Twelve still labored under visions of an earthly Messiah kicking out the Romans. They had just been arguing over which of them would be His right-hand man once He assumed an earthly throne. I can't imagine how He tolerated this in the face of His own agony. This was the Final Passover Meal, as after this it would have no meaning. Thus, Jesus selected the last two elements, normally representing future promises, as the beginning of the New Covenant. He was the future hope symbolized by those elements, and thus gave them a new meaning for a new future hope in His Return.

Taking the matzo set aside earlier, Jesus identified it with His body. Specifically, He described it as the sacrifice of His life, the substance of who He was and what He had taught, the incarnation and living will of Jehovah. The Cup of Blessing became the symbol of His blood shed for sins. The disciples realized He was calling Himself the Passover Lamb, and were trying to process the idea of His sacrifice. They were too busy trying to sort out the symbolism to hear Him bluntly saying He was about to die. Later, even after some forty days with them in His resurrected body, they were still asking if He was about to restore the independent kingdom status to the Nation of Israel. It took the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost to make possible the full impact of what He had promised: His Kingdom could not be confined to this world, nor even this thing called "time."

Paul later reprimands the Corinthian church for having become so worldly in their observance of something totally symbolic and other-worldly. During the early years of the New Testament Church, folks would celebrate the New Passover with a continuation of the ritual meal, calling it a "Love Feast," sort of a potluck in ancient terms. Afterward, they would reenact the ritual Jesus instituted that night in Jerusalem. In Corinth, the wealthy would have leisure to gather early and pig out so as not to share with the later arriving lower classes, who worked until sundown. Some of the rich would have had time to get drunk by then. This was the same old Corinthian culture carried over into church. By the time they got around to the ritual, it was hardly in honor of the Lord Jesus. To correct this idiocy, Paul rehashed the story, then told them to drop the Love Feast, since they were incapable of doing it righteously. Until Paul could come in person to really straighten things out, it was best they simply hold the ritual observance at worship. Thus, Paul did not actually do away with the Love Feast, but ordered the Corinthians to set it aside for a time.

In our practice today, it would probably be a good idea to consider having a Love Feast – everyone bringing food as an offering of love to Jesus Christ, then sharing equally with those who can't bring as much. However, this only works when the local body can overcome the Corinthian selfishness so common in many Western churches today. Afterward, it hardly matters what sort of bread is used, as long as it is bread. Nor would I see a demand for wine from grapes, but just about any appropriate local fruit juice. So in places like rural Indiana, why not cornbread and apple cider? Getting hung up on such details is legalism, but there's nothing wrong with sticking to matzo and wine. The ground of

meaning under all this has moved, and it is no longer a detailed ritual provided in a written law. While there is nothing wrong with hearkening back to the Hebrew source, it is no less reverent to shake free of that by isolating the ritual to its new meaning.

Something I consider essential is using a common cup and a single loaf, as it were. In this, the symbolism of the Old Testament is too important, for it's not a serving, but a mere taste. It is a taste of shared food showing a promise shared by all who wait longingly for Him. As I've said elsewhere, it's wise to avoid having a congregation so large you can't reasonably share a common cup and loaf. Further, Paul makes it clear if there is no actual communion of hearts, there is no Communion Service. This business of "worthiness" was never a question of the worthy people; they are never worthy, nor can they be. It is the worthy manner which matters, wherein we all take a moment to remember our unworthiness, and solemnly celebrate His death, and look forward to His Return.

Church from Scratch

The Western Church has failed. She has moved so very far from her birth as the New Testament Church, the two would hardly recognize each other. Can we recover what has been so long lost?

Saved by Grace; Serve by Grace

Why? Why must churches continually craft programs and advertising to provoke and cajole their members just to show up half-way regularly? Why must it take weeks of pumping them up, planning all the details in advance, and handing them on a silver platter some one-day-per-year mission activity?

Thus the congregation is spoon-fed for years and never learns to feed itself. The fact is that we are delivering babies who never intend to grow, enrolling students who never intend to graduate, enlisting soldiers who never intend to fight, and registering racers who never intend to run. Our motto has become "There he is Lord, send him!" The Ship of Zion is no longer manned by a volunteer crew working for sheer love of the Captain, but is steered by a pilot and an assistant pilot, while the remainder are paying passengers who are going along for the ride and complaining as they go. Many congregations are made up of half-converted individuals who think that when Jesus said we were to be childlike, he meant "childish" and they have to be petted and pampered to even keep them coming, much less to minister to others.⁵

The system draws them in, but from the start primes them to take the path of passivity. There are plenty there who don't belong, not really. To keep that bunch moving, we use lots of worldly means. In so doing, we cripple the real believers, those who would really move on their own if we let them. Unfortunately, they tend to move in ways which don't fit in the program, and certainly not in the budget. God forbid it should break their dependency on the clergy!

We seek a church filled with movers, self-propelled by the Holy Spirit living in them, a leaderless faith. By grace they come into the Kingdom, a miracle of God's hand. By grace they continue in His calling, for it remains a miracle of God's hand. We don't promote, provoke, cajole, etc. We inform and build up that which exists, because no man can create it. We allow complete freedom to decide, "I will serve Him." We seek the house church type of congregation.

No Need for Demolition

Nothing in the preceding pages should signal a proposal we reject everything about mainstream churches. Much good takes place there. Organizations can work, and do so with far better results than we now see. The problem is we tend to consider poorly how to prevent the organization becoming the central concern, as if faithfulness to Jesus was defined solely as faithfulness to the organization. Was there not a Reformation over just such a false idea?

⁵ From "The Priesthood of All Believers," by Karl Ketcherside <http://housechurch.org/basics/ketcherside.html>

It is widely acknowledged the current typical structure is too deeply wedded to a passing cultural-political ecology. What we normally think of as Evangelical Protestant churches and denominations today have passed their heyday. Nor should we suppose the Emergent movement is anything more than a temporary fix. It may well extend her life for awhile, but she is a terminal patient. Western civilization itself is about to suffer a major shock, and it's become painfully apparent "church" is entirely too dependent on it.

Yet, we would be foolish to expect the witness of Christ to fade with it. The Body of Christ has lived through worse trials. What comes next we cannot guess, but we can be sure the Kingdom will have a witness. What "church" means, what it looks like and how it tends to operate, will certainly be different. We should never mistake the method for the mission. Any ministry which clasps to that truth, embraces and weds to it now, should expect to pass through the fire nicely.

Let us dream just a moment, and pretend some current organization wakes up. Perhaps the realization sinks in that all the trappings are just that, trappings and nothing more. What would you expect to see in a church awakened? Unlike others who have embraced the house church model, this writer will not dismiss having professionally trained called servants, but would demand they realize they are *servants*. Nor do we here reject ownership of real estate or facilities, but demand a flexibility not now practiced anywhere. Perhaps better would be leasing or renting. Certainly there must be a rejection of any contract with any government, if at all possible. Naturally, this envisions an end to the monster churches, but those have never been a good idea.

Saying more on these lines would only further alienate those deeply committed to the status quo. The point is made. Easier by far it would be to start a wholly new work, and let God make of it what He will, but that may be neither possible nor desirable in all cases. Let us examine some of the possibilities. Should it all come to naught, the exercise would hardly be a waste of time. To think on these things puts us far ahead of those whose faith may well die when the Hand of God moves in judgment over the West.

A Fresh Foundation

It would be easy to write whole volumes on what I alone see as theological failures in Southern Baptist churches. Many of my arguments aren't original. A primary example is the failure to remain close enough to the Reformed roots of theological identity. Without apology, I decry Arminian theology in all its manifestations. Further, I have often pointed to a massive wave of Synergist teaching, regardless whether it is a conscious rejection of Monergism.

Those who teach synergism believe that salvation is a cooperative effort between God and man.... Most people, based on their own perceptions, assume synergism to be true. They assume that though God made it possible for people to be saved, it was something in them, apart from any special work of grace, that caused them to "accept Christ" as they say. That's what it seems like. We must gain our theology from the Bible, not from our interpretations of our own experience. The Bible does not teach synergism, but that salvation is an act of God.⁶

Most of the membership have been trained to think Synergist. It's tied to Dispensationalism, which has already been addressed. The point is, the list of errors is long, with many souls sharing much of it.

Rather, the greatest theological mistake was made long ago, long before English was used to discuss Christ. At the very base of most errors was the adoption of Western philosophical structure. Surely many would recognize the old debate about inductive versus deductive thinking. It's not a matter of superiority, but application. In things temporal, inductive reasoning helps greatly. It serves well making sense of the material world. Computers, anyone? Not possible without inductive reasoning. The greatest disaster was using it to enhance theological understanding. The human mind is fully adaptable, capable of shifting between Eastern and Western logical constructs. For things eternal in nature, deduction is the only approach. All one need and can know about things of the Spirit are

⁶ From "Rejecting Synergism and Returning to Monergism," by Bob DeWaay
<http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue93.htm>

revealed, coming down from above, an assumption many have forgotten. Actually, this mistake began before Jesus was born.

Jesus fought often against a view of Moses drawn from the Western mindset adopted by the Jewish establishment. If you examine many of His public debates from that awareness, you see it forms a major part of most conflicts. This adoption of Western logic by the Jews, rooted in their commercial dealings in Alexandria, Egypt, particularly in rabbinical colleges there, was the primary source of the Talmud and all its errors. Scholars have found ample references to the Pharisaical notion the Talmud was more authoritative than the Torah (Matthew 15:1-9). The bigger problem was the rejection of the emphasis on spiritual truth as viewed from the Ancient Near Eastern mindset. It is this latter viewpoint which undergirds the whole Old Testament, and is the one best route to understanding Jesus Himself.

It's not as if to say God thinks in Hebrew. Rather, Hebrew culture tends to reflect how God thinks. Seeing we can't even trust most modern Jewish scholars to properly promote this, it calls us to work a little harder digging up the bones of ancient Semitic thought. Here's an odd thing: modern Arabs come closer to an Old Testament mindset than modern Jews. If we understand either one of the two – Arabs or Semitic thought – the other makes much more sense. Not in the sense we need to act more like modern Arabs, but we need to recognize the fundamental assumptions about the world are rather similar. To have the mind of Christ includes very much being more Ancient Hebraic. To read Scripture with a Western-Analytical mind means often missing the point. (See the Appendix for more on this topic.)

Virtually everything else we could say about the failure of the modern Western church begins here.

The Family Plan

With a fresh foundation of Semitic understanding, we are in a much better place to build up a church on the New Testament model. This takes planning, not planting. Nowhere in the Word do we see mention of the concept of intentionally planting a new work in the modern sense. Indeed, that may be the very worst way to go about it. Keeping an eye on the Eastern viewpoint, we must examine how the Early Church did it.

During the First Century and shortly after, churches arose simply because Christians went somewhere and made converts. Very few went out on a mission journey; most went because persecution drove them out of Jerusalem, or because they were seeking a new market for their regular work or business, or some other reason. When they went, they took the gospel message with them. Generally, they started with fellow Jews first, but quickly included Gentiles. A church arose because these believers met together according to the Old Testament norm of synagogue. Even when missionaries went abroad to start churches, we note the method was not to begin by constructing a facility, but to make converts from among Jews first. Whether that worked or not, they eventually did make converts of local Gentiles, then went about finding either a local sponsor or engaging in some trade to fund the work of establishment and pay their way. Eventually they would accept funds from previously grown churches, but never demanded it. They allowed God to select the funding mechanism.

There are, of course, some parts of the ancient methods which will not work today. In the West, it's almost certain standing in the central plaza and preaching is just about pointless. The reason should be obvious: The public square is no longer "the public square." That is, people do not typically gather or pass through the main city square because that's not where news and goods are exchanged any more. In the New Testament, when that was not an option for whatever reason, converts were made simply by ordinary daily contact while going about the business of living. That was always the bottom line in spreading the gospel message. In the process of doing whatever you do to earn an income, or whatever means you have to occupy your time, share the gospel, first by living it. Just the normal routine human activity, based on an eternal perspective, will cause you to stand out in the world. People are going to ask, and you will have to explain that weirdness. This is the method which hasn't changed throughout history.

Thus, we don't plant churches, especially not using the tools of modern market analysis and

demographics studies. That leads to a narrow selection of prosperous and growing communities, which leads in turn to prosperous growing churches filled with one small segment of the population, folks who never leave their comfort zone because they assume it's right and proper to demand the church bend to their cultural bias. Simply go where you go, in full faith God is in charge of the strategy. Live by the other-worldly focus of the Kingdom of Heaven, and He will surely draw to that those He has elected to salvation among the people you encounter. Every time you and one other believer meet, you are the church. If you then intentionally meet for fellowship in the Spirit, you have a congregational worship service. If you add teaching, it's just a regular church meeting, regardless of the hour or day of the week. Add more to the meeting in someone's home, and you have house church.

There is nothing in Scripture keeping anyone from baptizing new believers, nor serving communion. No clergy required. If you get enough families together and can afford it, you can set aside one member to become your full time elder. There is plenty of Scripture describing the qualifications. You can even send him out to get advanced professional training, as long as you realize a degree no longer means much – if it ever did – in terms of spiritual qualifications to serve and lead. Academic rigor is not limited to certified, high-priced institutions of higher learning. Indeed, seminaries are fast becoming the place where denominational hierarchy instill their own peculiar brand of corruption in the process of weeding out people who march to a different drummer. The proper biblical model is established scholars of the Word taking on disciples, who then take their learning and disciple others. We note in passing: seniority in the Bible, in the sense of who has served longest and most faithfully, was at a premium. Energetic innovators were generally expected to gain some proper discipline – be a disciple – before leading. Meanwhile, there's nothing in the Bible forcing you to hire a professional. A church is led by the Holy Spirit, working through whomever He pleases, and with the agreement of the members.

Membership in any body is nothing more than a mark of acceptance from the others. This is more about adoption of a family member than it is some fair and objective procedure. You can't take a glimpse into the Lamb's Book of Life to see if they are listed; you can only work to discern if their fruit qualifies them for inclusion. That fruit is best manifested not in holiness so much as growth. That is, regardless how mighty your spiritual gifts, there's always room for improvement. That's the same for evangelism: Our greatest power to show His glory is the change in us over time. It should be obvious there are ways to convey conditional inclusion until such time as the new family member has proven too valuable to lose, not because of some measurable performance, but because they show the miracle power of love and devotion of Christ regardless of ability to actually perform. The basis for inclusion is the evidence of that miracle of regeneration, the spiritual DNA you can't deny.

We thus return to the very root of the whole thing: It's a miracle of God. Any other basis and you don't have church. It's a miracle of God's grace we are included in His Kingdom, a miracle of His Spirit to lead us to any new location, a miracle of His power to live the gospel and draw whomever He elects, a miracle of loving fellowship between His children wherever they are, and a miracle bonding of service in faith which creates a church. No need for marketing plans, demographic surveys, and economic factoring. Go where you go in your daily life for Him. There's no need for heavy investment in real estate or facilities. Just meet where you can as He provides. There's no use for membership procedures, lists, budgets, staffing and committees. It's just a family, growing by heavenly adoption.

Now that's a real New Testament church!

False Model

The wise old preacher told me, "In every congregation, you've got a lot of people who don't do much of anything. They are members, but it doesn't seem they are actually born-again. There are a bunch more who do stuff, but try to avoid decision making. They are faithful, but want no part of keeping discipline. They'll try to go with the flow on voting and such. You have pastor them, too." This is wrong. Not that they should not be pastored, but we should not settle for that. It's wrong on several levels.

First, we have here a reflection of the false model of church structure. This situation assumes a

business model, not the proper biblical concept of the family. Too often a pastor refers to his “church family” when it means nothing more than a CEO referring to his “corporate family” – words to justify requiring an organizational devotion. A church has business aspects, but its basic identity is not as a business. Membership guidelines should reflect courtship and marriage, not contract negotiations. It is scripturally impossible to treat each new member the same regarding entrance, because each carries their own baggage, needs, and gifts. We have in our churches too hastily drawn in each candidate in the drive for numbers.

Second, he assumes it rests on human power to run a church. A proper biblical church is saved by grace, and must continue in grace. While we acknowledge the factors of psychology and group dynamics, we defy them to have the last word. Those behavioral sciences are tools to diagnose spiritual problems, to which the real solution is the Spirit, which may or may not include using standard behavioral remedies. We do not accept the human norms for a divine operation. We do not sit down and calculate an acceptable level of loss, of carrying a certain amount of dead weight, and focusing on simple “smooth operation.” If all you want is organizational tranquility, try a graveyard. People living and growing in Christ is messy, all the way to the top.

Third, this all puts the organization in the center, rather than the individual believer. While we might say good words about individual needs, we don’t act on them. We’ve been conditioned to think quite backwards, because seeking the health of the group should take us through the lives of every individual. The group is not, and should not be, some homogeneous thing, but a collection of unique individuals. Adding or removing any one person changes the character of the group. If we follow the concept of courtship and family, no one can possibly be left to their own devices with some unspoken requirement to fit themselves into the group. We don’t sell our faith as a standard package offered to all candidates. Evangelism is enticing new members by the greatness of our love for them; discipleship is continuing that courtship by pulling them ever closer, and more deeply involved in the family.

Fourth, we assume too much a tightly limited involvement, as if church was just one more thing people do. It’s not about scheduling a few hours of each week for something added to a busy life. The Kingdom of God is central to a person’s being, or they have no part at all in it. Faith in Christ is not a selection of minor adjustments to your normal routine, born on a sales pitch offering a better way to do those routine activities. It is a complete disruption of the routine, consuming it and subsuming it wholly under a new and all-encompassing regime. We offer the one thing in life these people really need, regardless whether they are conscious of that need when we encounter them. It may require shedding everything they felt mattered up to that point.

Everyone can do evangelism, because everyone knows how to fall in love. Winning souls is more about winning hearts. Perhaps some would say it’s too easy for sinners to mistake what we are offering. Yes, it’s more dangerous than the standard soul-winning approach, but “danger” is one of the primary adjectives of a life following Jesus. Part of this risk is due to the Western twisted cultural view of love, and we are all about redeeming human misunderstandings. Everyone has an almost instinctive grasp of proper boundaries. Our primary struggle is not against lack of intellectual knowledge about evangelism, nor against the inertia overcome by behavioral conditioning. Even lunatics could be successful with that standard. Our primary struggle is getting people to understand the very nature of sacrificial love, of healing their emotional injuries so they can reach out from their very inner nature. We depend too much on the imagery of soldiers, but have forgotten the chief weapon is the Word of God, a phrase referring to a Divine Person, who personifies love.

Fire in My Bones

When should you consider a commitment to the gospel Ministry? When you can’t do anything else.

We are talking about living a life of faith. That’s commanded for everyone in Christ, but for those whose calling and vocation is the Word itself, they must lead in exemplifying that faith life. They must have already placed themselves in a vulnerable position, failed plenty, stumbled through the dazed understanding and misunderstanding of God’s will in a life and calling He reserves for those who must serve Him in ways few know.

The highly competent, always-got-it-right successful “ministers” are mere hucksters. You don’t see the Apostle Paul claiming that sort of life. He spoke openly of his “thorn in the flesh” which today would keep him from that upper rung of Professional Christian success. Instead, he spoke of having all the bad experiences of stonings, shipwrecks, diseases, etc. This man, the pinnacle of faith and obedience after Jesus, the one human representative God chose to bridge the gap between a small, Jewish sect, to a world-wide faith of Gentiles, too – he never forgot he was fallen and failing. All he did was the work of God’s grace in spite of his humanity. Worldly success, TV shows and custom tailored suits all mean you’ve compromised, and you don’t follow Jesus very closely.

This is not a profession, with a guild structure conferring privileges, or a union guaranteeing wages and a minimal level of comfort and public respect. The true saints of God hardly pay attention to such things. They don’t ask the crowds to come to them for a serving of Gospel Truth, in a comfortable setting where everyone can show off their new “do.” They are taking the gospel to people who probably wouldn’t show up at such places, but instead are found in places where sin is rampant. They take the gospel to Hell armed with a water pistol, backed up by a legion of angels, because that’s how God works.

The rest is just man doing what man does for worldly things. Just let me carry Paul’s spare pair of sandals to the next stoning, so I can be blessed by a few cuts and bruises in pursuit of the Kingdom. Mortification is the one forgotten doctrine in our world.

Why the House Church Model?

Let me attempt to explain why switching to the house church model is such a good idea. It’s important to realize I don’t reject the idea of working with or on a regular church staff. Rather, I intend to work as if the one best way of doing church is the house church concept. As much as possible, I intend to implement that concept wherever I serve.

Breaking Away

Whenever a move of God in your life places you outside the mainstream, you face a lot of questions from those who love you, and those whom you love – that should cover just about everyone, since we are sent to a fallen world with the love of Jesus. More importantly, it addresses the motive for receiving and answering questions (1 Peter 3:13-17).

When we announced our decision to begin a new ministry, we were immediately asked by many, “Why a house church?” The root of the matter is this comes after some years of consideration, soul searching, prayer, study, and all the other stuff we do carrying out Jesus’ advice to “count the cost.” Indeed, I’ve already done similar work. With the weight of all that behind me, I can confidently assert I am being obedient to the Lord. Right away, those who suffer some insecurity in their spiritual walk will see this move as some sort of poke at them for not doing the same. I can’t help that; you stand before God with your own conscience. Most certainly my choice signals I am willing to ask you at least consider my reasons as possibly applying to you in your own calling. Nothing would please me more than see a great move in the same direction world wide among Christians, and especially here in the US.

In previous writings, I’ve made it clear the evangelical churches are too tightly wound into the politics of this world. We demand tax breaks and engage directly in secular politics, even though we pretend the rules are rather strict. This has served as an invitation for reciprocation, the meddling hand of the government, and we believe the secular state has crossed the line. Not some easily identified, universally recognized point of departure, but the collective events of the recent past together show we can no longer believe in the system. What was once a more or less benign secular human institution is now decidedly hostile to the Kingdom. What we had not realized in the past is quite how unsurprising this should be to us.

Human civil government is required by the Covenant of Noah. Those of us serving the Kingdom of God – *in* this world but not *of* it – have at best an uneasy truce with such government. A constitution

may be founded on principles we espouse from the Word, but it takes only a slight shift in personnel for those principles to be forgotten. Word your constitutions and laws as you wish, but someone determined to ignore God's mandates will find a way. The dominance of principled Christian actors in government is a thin hedge, indeed. A truly Christian government, once instituted, would fail quickly, because those governed will never be so dominantly righteous sin won't break forth in rebellion within the first generation.

The truth is, while the government is indeed evil, it was instituted by God as such so that it may effectively prosecute evildoers. An inherently good-doing government is impotent against the individual who does not have God and does not care to live in His righteousness. Caesar is assigned the duty of mitigating the violence that *that* man or woman will do.⁷

The very act of trying to weed out sinners from its population requires a government to wield the sword on our behalf.

No problem? Wait until you find yourself at odds with the majority, and declared *persona non grata*. It's easy to say Christians of good conscience will disagree, as will inevitably happen, but who gets to decide when you no longer qualify as "Christian"? If you've never faced the wrath of a professing believer who finds your uniqueness offensive, you've lived a very sheltered life, indeed. Do you want the power of the State behind their convictions? Neither do I.

So we have this thing in the US called "separation of church and state," presumably connected to the 1st Amendment. Parties on both sides of that separation argue over whether and how that rubric applies, but recent history indicates we are better off with a generally secular government paying no attention to churches either way – neither hindering nor giving much weight to their opinions. That we American Evangelicals feel a collective sense of loss from the latter half of that equation, that we sense a surging cultural tide against previous assumptions in our favor, does not justify engaging the democratic process as a solid "Christian" political front. Sinners will sin; throughout human history every culture has peaked only to slide down the other side. You are surprised the sinners demand more liberty to openly sin than we like?

Try suppressing them and they will see your efforts as an intrusion, and use all political weapons at their disposal to silence you. Use their methods – fight fire with fire – and you are no different. You lose your claim to the moral high ground. Oppose them morally and you will eventually lose, because they cheat. Get over it. Meanwhile, as they gain ground, don't in the least be surprised to see the sword of government turned against you in revenge. Having once engaged in agreements with the government, via the likes of 501(c)(3), you are bound by the contract. That the policy of government has changed does not let you out of that contract, because it was never promised to favor Christian faith in perpetuity.

For me and my house, it's already gone too far. We have opted out of the contract by starting a work which ignores the state. I am altogether certain the day will come when such peaceful opting out will no longer be acceptable to the state. Until then, we make the most of this opportunity.

It Gets Worse

Time to roll your eyes and talk about tinfoil hats. That's okay, as my favorite t-shirt exclaims, "I am the wretch the song refers to." You aren't supposed to take me seriously unless the Lord moves in your heart. For those whom the Lord moves, read on.

I won't divulge the details because this is not about me. There are no grounds for boasting. However, it is pertinent to note I have served in a federal role, with a significant security clearance. That role put me in a position to read guidelines and directives which, though not in themselves state secrets, were certainly not routine traffic. Some of it made me weep. I went into that job with the best noble intentions, only to find the whole thing was a giant lie, a matrix of deception at different levels. What makes this paragraph relevant is my knowing for myself, beyond all doubt: The US is intentionally becoming a police state.

⁷ From "The Incorporated Church," by David Beck <http://yourownjesus.net/501c3QA2.htm>

Unlike many underground Patriots, there is nothing here of screaming, wringing hands, or a call to arms. You may choose to plan armed resistance; it could be you are certain the Lord calls you to that. It is a darksome path, leading to a mad and surreal land, so count the cost. The only call to arms here is based on Ephesians 6:

Finally, my brothers, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the world's rulers, of the darkness of this age, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Therefore take to yourselves the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. (vv. 10-13)

Holding a Reformed, Amillennial eschatology does not mean we ignore the references to Armageddon, but we know it's merely a symbol of the human penchant for warfare. Not only between nations, it includes warfare between governments and their own people. There's nothing new there; have you not read where Saul chased David all over southern Judah? The nature of government is to control, and further to increase control, to include the very mind of man, if possible. The freedom of a Christian conscience was the sticking point in the Reformation, the essence of the political upheaval. A ruler, whether civil or ecclesiastical, cannot command the convictions God alone places in a spirit new born. The very existence of the regenerate soul threatens Satan's hold over this world.

In the Reformation, asserting the human conscience was a fresh, revolutionary idea. Today we take it for granted. So much so I must warn readers those changes in federal guidelines I mentioned above came more than a decade prior to 9-11. The powers that be know this is not something which can be done overnight, so they are taking their time, bit by bit. Professional police journals spoke of a return to Community Policing in the '80s, a revival of the "beat cop." This was meant to fail, as the excuse needed for the ubiquitous surveillance and intrusive information gathering we see now. Indeed, so certain were the elite minds behind this, they laid the foundations for a cultural shift at the turn of the previous century. In plain sight, but in the dreary, turgid prose of government publications, this plan called for a radical shift in education in 1905. Instead of building the intellect, the goal was conditioning for a new kind of slavery.

Yes, those who stand for election today, as do those who stand in the classrooms across America, are mere patsies for a secretive cabal, whose souls are owned and steered by the "spiritual wickedness in high places." This is not something unique to America, nor this time in history. Such powers have always been around, and Paul hardly bothered to mention them except to note we need not fear them, for we have the service and armor of much higher power. Realizing the very spiritual nature of this evil, we are hardly surprised when churches are also subverted to one degree or another. Does your church have a US flag in the auditorium? My parents can remember when it was considered inappropriate, an intrusion of the state into God's affairs. And let me assure you, the introduction of Dispensationalism via Scofield's Bible notes, a wholly novel viewpoint in Christian history, was sponsored and advertised heavily by the same man who sought to personally manipulate three presidents – Samuel Untermyer. Scofield was a crook, a very crafty scoundrel with a brilliant marketing idea, and a man easily bought. Many in the pulpit today serve more the purposes of the secular state than the Heavenly Kingdom.

You see a great boasting of private education among Evangelicals. Homeschooling is a good thing! Why not the home church? I assure you tighter regulations are coming soon, but until they do, let us prepare the way. Historical research indicates those already poor were hardly affected by the Great Depression of 1930s. It could not touch them, for they had nothing to lose. Learn, Church, learn the lessons of history. Civilizations rise and fall, an endless cycle repeated until the Lord comes back, and ours today is on the decline. Is your congregation so deeply invested in this world you cannot imagine operating out of a backpack? That day will come, and I am certain in our lifetime. When His judging hand sweeps across the land, will He find your doorposts swathed in the Blood of the Lamb, or will you be caught in the courts of Pharaoh?

My household is packed and ready.

It's about Freedom

There's more than one kind of freedom. In this case, it's freedom from unnecessary rules. Make all the noise you like about welcoming anybody into your church house, the door is always wider at the house church. That's not a matter of superiority; it's a choice of mission fields. I can bring a Bible study to homes where I'll find people who wouldn't be caught dead in a mainstream church facility. If you've ever read materials from the old Lay Renewal Movement, you'll recognize that reluctance as a primary motive for having ministries outside the facility. There's a psychological barrier for sinners, and you can't wipe it away with advertising.

No dress code, no membership requirements, no forms to fill out, no schedules – to some degree those things are necessary for a mainstream organized church. They are death to the house church. We have no use for tax exemptions, staff, budgets, or committees. All offerings are private gifts, and accountability is personal, between you and the Lord. No one passes a plate or basket.

The whole thing requires utter reliance on God to move in people's hearts. This is the practical side of Calvinism, again. Our convictions require a hands-off approach in first place. We don't convince sinners to come to Christ; the Holy Spirit does that. We simply explain the gospel message, answer questions, and wait on God to move. The convicting power of the Holy Spirit is sufficient for both sinners needing salvation, and believers needing a closer walk with Christ.

That we must take the message to them remains the command of Christ, the Great Commission. No where does the Bible say we are to persuade sinners to repent, but we are to expose them to the Truth. That means first we must live the truth. However, even our best witness is not our holiness, but the *improvements* we exhibit as the Lord leads us closer to Him daily. The primary Fruit of the Spirit we know about, but the power of the Lord is demonstrated by the differences others see in the growing quality of that fruit.

A critical part of that is a willingness to let anybody host a Bible study, if the Lord moves them. If I can stand to be in that house, that yard, that garage – wherever – with those people, they'll get the Word of God. If they can't take it, that's not my problem. They won't invite me back, but they got it at least once.

They won't be able to reject the message for the sake of rudeness, because I am bound by His Spirit to walk in love. I'm also bound to be direct and honest. Somewhere in that definition I can find a way to gently show the Love of Christ without being pushy. I have nothing to sell, no vested interest, no need for numbers, just a free serving of Living Water for anyone who realizes their thirst. If that means periods when nobody asks, it won't mean closing the ministry. There's nothing to lose, because I have nothing except that Truth.

Organization Men

Organizational Theory is incredibly boring. If you can stay awake through the classes, you can learn an awful lot, though. For example, as an organized group grows larger, natural human variations become a bigger problem. It's not additive, but geometric, insofar as any sense of quantitative analysis is possible. We tend to measure such things by counting the increased number of man hours required to put out the little fires of human conflict.

We notice a great many other things, especially viewed through a biblical lens. On the one hand, God's grace is greater than all our sin. Our foibles cannot get in the way of His divine plan, but they will hinder our perception of His glory as He operates sovereignly in our lives. We know from Scripture our greatest joy comes from truth revealed in us. Against this, we have added complications to seeing His glory when the size of our fellowship group grows. The natural human conflict arising from our fallen state can grab so much focus, we fail to see God's hand, and we miss out on the joy of His glory.

In adding more people to our churches, we ostensibly seek to share that glory experience. We are commanded to work with others in the Kingdom. The nature of our combined witness is the miracle of love binding together fallen humans who would otherwise – in the flesh – have no reason to notice

each other, and perhaps many fleshly reasons to hate. The disparity of personalities, backgrounds, orientations, all pull us apart. They also serve to strengthen the glory of God. In a sense, it gives Him more options to involve us in His glory. It also increases the likelihood of including someone whose weaknesses are quite destructive. We must of necessity include people who will surely act contrary to the Kingdom values, who will use and abuse the organization for personal gain, or worse.

Thus, it's no surprise organizing even such a divine activity as worship and service of Christ means having rules and procedures in place to minimize such things. However, those same preventive measures inevitably serve to limit human variation. Either the member adapts, and becomes more like the group, or is excluded. In yet another perverse turn, it is this homogeneity which most empowers the abusers, should they ever gain control. We call this "corruption," and some of us life-long servants of Christ have seen too much of it.

Making a choice to keep things small and informal does mean forsaking certain opportunities. For those of us who have been deeply and frequently scarred by organizational abuses and failures, we gain the opportunity to break away from further abuse. Assuming we aren't seeking cultic control, we lose control over the variations, but have no need for it. For those of us who cannot serve Christ in the narrower strictures of larger, more formally organized bodies, house churches are an open door to reach others who cannot seem to fit in the mainstream church structure.

It is completely unnecessary for us oddballs to sneer at the formal institutions, any more than the reverse. We have seen where your mainstream church becomes, among other things, a breeding ground for preparing a few more of us. People who try it, give it their best effort in God's power, and find it doesn't work, often join us in a state fully prepared and highly sensitive to the needs of a segment of the fallen world unreachable to organized religion.

For these blessings, we thank you mainstream churches, even as we thank the Lord.

The Thing Itself

The final point is actually the other edge of the sword's blade, the other half of the previous point: People love you; organizations and institutions do not. Indeed, the latter love only themselves. That is, insofar as an impersonal entity can love anything.

We have learned long ago when a revolution reaches the final stages, it is institutionalized, it is the establishment. It is no longer a revolt. A revolt is passion, a drive to change. Once it has succeeded, it stands to preserve those changes. The faith community during the First Century AD was a revolt. It was the final realization this world is not worthy of our focus of energy. It is something to be escaped, and until then, to be disrupted by eruptions of Eternity expressed in human lives.

When you organize and institutionalize, that becomes the end in itself. We so easily forget the organization is a mere tool, to be cast aside when it no longer serves the purpose. To go a step further with institutionalizing the organization, you have killed the purpose. Jesus Christ died for you out of a divine love too deep for any other expression. Organized religion loves only itself. It uses people as the tools to keep itself alive and growing.

That a great deal of love and grace can be found within the halls of institutional religion shows only the possibilities of love under any circumstance. True loving hearts are what makes that work, not the organization within which they operate. If the organization does, indeed, serve the greater purpose of love, then things are in proper order. However, it is absolutely unavoidable on this earth that the organization's existence will take a bite out of that love.

The bigger the organization, the bigger the bite. Organizing means depersonalizing to some degree. So it must be. Organization is the enemy of the Holy Spirit, but can still serve some useful purpose, offer some gains otherwise not available. So we cannot kill the organization, because we otherwise cannot have more than one person involved at a time. Perhaps we should remind ourselves the secret is in the design of the organization.

If your organizing is in the Western mode, it is by definition unbiblical. Let us not forget Scripture is an Eastern product. Western civilization is by no means Christian. It is a result of essentially two

blended cultures – Latin and Teutonic – with a bit of Christian flavoring. That Christian flavoring itself is derived, not from the original source. Thus, the Christian element is more of an add-on, something more affected by the other influences than vice versa. A biblical organization is by definition more of the Near Eastern.

The primary model of biblical organization is the family. As a model, our first line of departure from the thing itself is obvious: the lack of genuine shared DNA. That is, we need not be blood kin to organize as a family. Roles can be assigned on some other basis. This is where the Lord takes over as Father and Founder, by the Blood of His Son, which flows in spirits and souls, not in veins. Recall the previous allusion to loving in Christ those whom, in the flesh, we may have great reason not to love at all. In Him, we love the unlovable, because the love of Christ is more invasive and more contagious than any other force man can imagine.

The Western model of organization removes the personal intentionally. It seeks some mythical equality and fairness, raising that to the level of godhead. When the Word says “God is no respecter of persons,” it is not about fairness, but about His knowing truly what’s behind the human facade. It’s inherently unfair God made me less than perfect in body when so many others are relatively normal. It’s inherently unfair God calls me to serve in a way which guarantees poverty, when so many others of His children are wealthy. It’s inherently unfair, too, I have the skill and intellect to write things people want to read, when others can’t type or spell. Well, you are reading this, aren’t you? And what makes you so special in the Kingdom you have a the ability to read English when millions of Christians do not? If you want fairness and egalitarianism, you don’t want God.

However, if you seek the familial love of God, you’ll find yourself driven to treat others with grace commensurate to their varied needs. You won’t program that love and grace, with memorized evangelism spiels carefully crafted to appeal to that segment of the population most likely to convert easily – at least psychologically – and most likely to attend regularly, and most likely to give generously. Instead, you’ll simply love all comers, all who pass through your personal space, whatever God tells you that may be. You’ll live His truth, to include speaking words of truth when the time comes, and concern yourself not at all with results. For you, the giving is the thing which makes you alive.

It should be obvious at this point, house church is all about creating a family of grace. The institutional church simply cannot work that way; it has to be “de-institutionalized.” That is, to the degree the institutional church matters to you, love and grace do not. If you could convince everyone within the organization it can be torn down and disposed of at the slightest provocation... well, you just try that and see what happens. The knee-jerk reactions of horrified looks will answer the question.

The mainstream church is more about the organization and facilities than about the people.

Appendix – Failed Assumptions: East vs. West

Logical Roots

How do you bring people around behind a barrier they cannot see? Our society is so deeply pervaded by the influence of Western rationalism, the very frame of reference people hold for thought, even their subconscious processes, we hardly know where to begin. If they have attended a good college, they may have been exposed to courses in philosophy. Even then, it’s altogether unlikely they have been able to see how it forms the basis for their very thoughts about thinking. If they went to any lesser college, it’s unlikely they have even the most basic grasp of philosophy. Oddly, it’s the idiocy of political liberalism which provides some useful introduction to the concept of thought processes which might be amiss from reality.

In dealing with born-again believers, we have the singular advantage of their recognition Ultimate

Truth is found in Scripture. The primary key is God's declaration:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," saith the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9)

We still have to explain that declaration does not mean merely: "You can't get there." Rather, it calls to us to come up ever higher. With this, we can begin showing Western believers there is something beyond themselves to which they must aspire.

It helps to show how our current situation is faulty, and something of how we got in this mess. Unfortunately, to make something accessible to the masses, we are forced to oversimplify. We can talk about the overbearing influence of the pagan Greek philosophers, but the list of their names and ideas is long and confusing. Thus, I choose to pick on Plato and Aristotle. Without bogging everyone down with a mass of reading, it's fair for our purposes to say both of these men made one very wrong assumption: man can conceivably figure it out on his own. This was, of course, a part of the bill of goods Lucifer sold to Eve: "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:5) Eve bought it, and every human since has fought hard to prevent discarding it. The revelation from Our Heavenly Father says now we have accepted this lie, we are all the more unable to do precisely that. We are fallen, and fully unable to so much as even *want* good as He defines it. Indeed, He *is* the definition of good. That's the heart of human failure: to believe man need not refer to God. Because there is indeed a simulacrum of usable reason which allows us to understand mere natural mechanisms, we assume we can use the same tools to discover and establish higher ideals on our own. What a sweet lie.

Let's look at this a bit more closely. A human is capable of observing events, and eventually seeing a cause and effect connection between certain things. A solid object bouncing off your head is painful, and can cause serious injury. Bouncing a rock off someone else's head can make them easier to deal with if they seem resistant to your efforts. Bouncing a rock off the head of a small animal can mean dinner. Thus, we form an idea about rocks and living beings. It always works the same. We call this "scientific method" or "inductive reasoning." Two things are going on here.

1. Observe all the samples of a single thing, then arrive at a description of what all those things have in common. Then classify it and create a structure of ideas like that for everything, with cross-referencing, indexing, etc.
2. Any set of observable data regarding consistent relationships and interactions between tangible objects results in a rule. From one rule, we can extend these observations to other relationships, and get from throwing rocks to super computers.

Between the two, along the way, our relative comfort and happiness seems to have been raised a good bit, so we call this "good." For those things we don't understand, we come to assume we will eventually work out the relationships of that, too. To some degree, we can use this method to explain the complexities of human behavior. What we cannot fully explain is well adjusted people waking up in terror at a nightmare. We can explain what provokes nightmares, but not why they are nightmares, as opposed to sweet dreams. This method certainly cannot explain why Jesus rose from the dead, so it dismisses the claim He did. We seem to be doing fine without believing that, no?

No. You see, there is a God in Heaven. He made all this, and we have taken it and run away from Him. He calls us back to Him, but the path of return is not going to be pleasant, so we don't want it. Yet, for some reason we do want it.

The Difference

Throughout history, we find a record of human longing and seeking for that one missing piece of understanding which makes sense of things which don't make sense. We keep seeking that one connection which bridges the gap, which helps us reach beyond to something or someone and quiet those unfulfilled, unnamed longings. Those of us who find faith and trust in Jesus Christ have that which everyone seeks. Sure, other religions make that claim. There is no proof which can be stated so

clearly as to move people past the barrier. It's been tried. Josh McDowell in a public debate managed to prove beyond all doubt, according to the rules of Western logic, the gospel message is objectively true. His opponents admitted they would be fools to reject it, but he observed this did not change any of them into Christians. Why did the power of logic and ideas fail?

There was no faith. There was no miracle of God touching a human heart to match with the logical conclusions, to make them a reality for the individuals. God was not in the logical proofs. Clearly, rules of logic have their limits. Thus, medical science cannot explain healing miracles, psychiatry can't quantify convictions which defy all efforts to educate, and tyrants can't force people of true faith to break under torture. True faith is a work of God, and no human authority can defy it. While faith can hardly be explained, its effects are notable.

We who live by faith understand instinctively there is something which comes down from Above which cannot be grasped by human understanding. However, with so many believers held fast by the Western frame of reference, there is an endless effort to apply human understanding to that something. Further, they seem quite satisfied by the results – until some piece of it falls apart. Sadly, this leads to doubts, even a loss of trust in God. Faith takes a beating when trials come, and your expectations are rooted in a false understanding. While such questions inevitably must come in all Christian lives, they need not be so numerous, nor so severe. Could it be we have pre-conceived notions of what that something is supposed to do, which notions are false?

In Mathematics courses, we learn about rules of logic, including dealing with certain "given" parts of the puzzle. In other words, in working toward a solution, there are things we aren't permitted to question. Working from such givens, we use a method of logic called "deduction." We deduce from known premises, using certain rules of logic, a reasonable answer to a question. This is considered the opposite of "induction" described previously as the "scientific method." Induction is about inputs, pulling together details and making sense of them. Deduction is about pulling down sense and making details fit. When you consider there is a source of *sense* which is responsible for creation of all things, including the ability to make sense itself, it might be wise to pay attention. There is a whole raft of givens from this Creator.

Indeed, the first human culture which acknowledged Him was based on viewing the world from His givens. The starting point of all thinking was revealed truth from Above. As you might expect, this resulted in a rather different set of assumptions about the world. It's easy enough to prove historically this world view is the oldest, the original, if you will. As time went on, more revelation came from Above (Hebrews 1:1), which clarified and extended these assumptions.

Oddly, this same culture was not known for leaving a great deal of archaeological evidence. This makes sense, when you consider a major element in this culture was a powerful awareness of the Fall. In accepting the given idea of all creation under a curse from the Fall, you won't take the material, tangible world too seriously. Instead, you'll be given to other-worldly concerns. This is not an atmosphere conducive to material progress, so building cities, discovering metals, creating masses of artifacts, and similar concerns are quite unlikely. In fact, the greatest legacy from this oldest human culture is literature. Much of that literature is found, or reflected, in the Old Testament. Of course, theirs would be an oral literature, for which writing down came somewhat later. Indeed, writing and carrying documents in physical form was an innovation they picked up from others. The others were a different type of people who were rather more concerned with material goods. You can read about the division of these two cultures way back in the beginning of human existence on earth in Genesis 4. While there's nothing to condemn material progress itself, you'll note a distinct moral condemnation of those who pay too much attention to acquiring it. The material folks begin to take human life less seriously, while the other group are characterized chiefly by the comment: "Then men began to call upon the Name of the Lord." (v. 26) This latter is called "Sons of God." The former, "Sons of Men," form a majority human trend of leaving some of their precious material goods buried in the sands of time.

The record of revelation we call "the Bible" is the only significant tangible product of the Sons of God. It presents a very consistent viewpoint about human events, and this viewpoint reflects the various revelations of God. The problem is, we keep trying to read the record of this revelation from a logical

framework quite different from those who wrote it, not to mention a different time and place. Those events recorded in the Bible were mostly an area of earth on the far eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea (the name means “center of the earth”). European culture was born west of those lands. We are stuck with a logical framework which arose in Europe. By the definitions of that same European viewpoint, we refer to this ancient biblical viewpoint as “Eastern” or “Oriental.” Our own viewpoint is called “Western” or “Occidental.” It’s not as if we can’t bridge the divide, as scholars have shown by the massive library of material addressing the differences. I intend to digest some of that academic material here so we can begin grasping the viewpoint of the Sons of God, for we have inherited that title.

Fundamentals

Everything is personal. Not in the sense of being subjective, for the subjective-objective dichotomy is a purely Western invention. To the Eastern mind, the single essential fact of life is the relationship between persons. This is not the touchy-feely emotional side of human interaction, something we Westerners associate with feminine psychology. Rather, everything is a matter of roles. God is the only one in His role. As Creator, His is the ultimate authority in all things. He has revealed how all authority among humans flows from Him, and has prescribed how various human roles interact. Most tension between humans is a result of unsettled definition of roles. In any given situation, there may be multiple roles at play, and it is taken for granted the various roles one person may hold will conflict to some degree. Even more challenging is the fluid nature of shifting roles, and the renegotiation of them. The first step in reaching toward peace with God is accepting your role before Him. From this we begin working out the other roles we have with the rest of His Creation, by reaching toward an understanding of His calling.

Every human relation is established by a covenant. In our minds, we could contrast the elements of covenant versus contract, for this latter is the essence of human interaction in the West. A contract is the commitment of resources, whereas a covenant is a commitment of persons. Contracts focus on measurable performance, an exchange of concrete quantities of goods and/or services. Feelings and harmonious relations are for the most part immaterial. This is completely the opposite of covenants. A covenant is the bond of assumed roles between two people. It establishes the nature of interaction, regardless of particular objectives. Specific behaviors may be stipulated as definitions of the relative roles. Time limits are rare in covenants, but are often central in contracts. Rather, covenantal relations are for life; if life brings major changes, then roles have to be renegotiated, though often this may be a mere formality establishing that everyone understands the obvious. The whole point is everyone being satisfied, happy with how things work.

Feelings are critical, but not commanding in Eastern thinking. Even when they are ignored, they are significant in the consideration; they have to be recognized to be discounted. Emotion is the basic means of communication. What passes between parties is not mere data, but significance. Thus, almost everything is expressed in symbolic terms, and hyperbole is rather expected. Emotions are often assumed merely for the sake of expression. It’s not important whether they are felt at that moment; they are built into the experience being shared. A subject is not described by its mere external qualities, but the impression one gets from encountering it. It may well be every encounter with that subject is the same, but such is not assumed. Context is everything. Thus, one seldom seeks to communicate mere facts, but communicates themselves – again, everything is personal. Facts for future reference may be deduced from the expression of self. Understanding your world is a matter of understanding persons. It is not anthropomorphic to speak of every subject as a “person,” as Westerners sneeringly assume. It is assumed in Eastern conversations a thing is not inherently good or bad, so much as how well it fits the purpose, or role. Nor is a specific behavior inherently good or bad, but viewed as proper or improper in the context, whether it matches the role assigned. Obviously some actions are always inappropriate, but they are considered good or bad based on propriety. Thus, even beneficent actions can “feel” wrong, and a particular event can be both good and bad at the same time.

Intent is everything, but is measured by responsibility within a given role. Everyone is responsible to someone, everyone serves a master, and that responsibility is defined by a covenant. A failure to

please the one you serve is a matter of violating the definition of your servant role. Even if your master is not particularly surprised, nor upset, there is an assumption of official anger over the failure. Everyone is expected to slip up now and then, but if your heart belongs to your master within that role, forgiveness is usually available. As one personally committed to serving, you are obliged to pass through whatever symbolic action is required to restore the covenant, to re-assume the proper role and reassert devotion. The master is not required to accept your apology, but you are required to give it. The master must decide whether the violation represents a permanent flaw in your covenant relations, or whether there is some hope for recovery. A living thing has been injured, and must be healed. If healing is not possible, there is always amputation. Cutting off a valued servant “limb” is the last resort. What that means in concrete terms depends on the context, of course. Even the most egregious mistakes can be justified on the basis of a faithful intent.

Because Easterners are so used to assigned roles, Westerners mistake acceptance for fatalism. Every human born wishes for more freedom and authority than he already possesses. However, Easterners realize authority is rooted in roles, broadly defined by revelation from God. Demanding a discretion not inherent in one’s role is sinful. One gains new freedoms by gaining new roles. New roles are offered by some authority, and invariably there are strings attached, because there must be a covenant. The abstract notion of independence from all authority, the individual against the world, is utterly evil, a rejection of God’s authority. However, if one has ascertained from revelation that their actions please the Master of All, he need not worry too much about lesser authorities being pleased. These lesser masters may well do him harm, consistent with the authority of their own roles, but they will surely have to deal with God for interfering in His business. As agent of any master, one knows whether enforcement of that master’s will is included in the servant role.

Accomplishments matter, but only as a mark of faithfulness to the role. Thus, time is not measured by steady beats of the timer, but relative to the context. Appointments are kept, but not by the second or minute, though perhaps by the hour. One appears before his master as ordered as soon as possible, because events are not nailed to a specific schedule, but when the time is right. One is on time when one appears at the right moment for the purpose of the master. Hindrances outside your authority may or may not be counted against you. Much depends on whether you explain appropriately, taking into account your role and the context of the moment. Obviously, some things won’t wait, and some things can’t be blamed on others in some roles. Those who understand holiness will accept full responsibility for some things on the general principle of being fallen. Death is peacefully accepted on such terms, because one’s life is not about length of years, but about faithfulness.

Why It Matters

We have only scratched the surface, yet with this most folks should be able to better understand the Bible. It should be easier to realize the nature of the Bible narrative, what really matters. Reading the Scriptures with Western eyes will see things not there, will miss what is there. The Western mind assumes inductive logic, which turns the world into objects, and results in materialism. Discovering things by induction has its place, but not where Scripture has already spoken.

Please note, even this explanation is framed in Western terms. To have done it in Eastern terms would require telling stories, and takes much more time and space. In the long run, it is more efficient for one to absorb an understanding, rather than have it handed over in a simple and dry format. To fully internalize wisdom, to become wise, is much more important than knowing and having skill. Cranking out skillful hands can be destructive if those hands are attached to foolish souls. Quantity is distinctly less important than quality. Thus, it’s common in the Bible to think of males as “boys” until they are near 30. Yet females, in their God-given roles, are usually ready for marriage well before 20, so a decade or two difference between husband and wife is common.

Historically, it has worked out exceptionally well for social stability. God’s favor is by far the number one concern, because that will assure any other apparent weaknesses – wealth, size, productivity – whether a person or a nation, won’t make any difference. Thus, ancient wisdom shows a bustling, acquisitive and powerful nation will burn out in just a few generations because they lack depth. The seeds of destruction are sown from the start. In other terms, they have chosen to stand under God’s

wrath, to take on traits inappropriate for their role.

We should expect Western civilization to collapse before long. The foundation of democracy is very shaky, because it assumes the individual is inherently virtuous, or can be made so with mere education. Rather than recognizing God has appointed a few to rule, we demand everyone take part in government in some childish assumption this is the best of all possible worlds. This ignores the Fall. Education by Western standards is rarely more than mere conditioning and training. This guarantees a false understanding of Creation and how things actually work at a deeper level. By God's design, humans cannot be made ready to carry the burden for stewardship of His Creation this way. Pretending God did not reveal the true nature of humanity is not the way forward. The short term gains in technology are no substitute for real wisdom. Human history is littered with civilizations crashing shortly after choosing to depart from God's revelation. Aside from concerns for personal redemption, there is a model for national survival often ignored. This is what the Law of Moses was all about. It had nothing to do with personal salvation, and everything to do with keeping the Jews together in the Promised Land until it was time for Messiah to be born.

Most of the conflict Jesus had with the Jewish rulers of His day was about their failure to follow even that simple, worldly model. They had left the true Semitic understanding nearly 200 years before, having adopted Western logic wholesale. They developed a large body of corrupted understanding of the Law, compiled into what we call the Talmud. This Talmud was the "tradition of the elders" Jesus referred to in some of his debates with the Pharisees, which they considered more binding than the actual text of the Torah. Thus, it's no surprise those born in His generation saw the final destruction of the Temple, and the dispersion of Jews from their homeland. Even today religious Jews are blinded by this Westernized corruption of Eastern culture. Neither they, nor any other nation, can expect God's full protection until they embrace the original culture of the Sons of God.

This does not mean strictly obeying the Law of Moses, but grasping the viewpoint underlying it. What Moses received on the Mountain of God was not all new and revolutionary. Much of it assumed the old Semite culture, incorporating its ways, and much of its religious understanding. Many of the rituals were similar to previous worship practices. Thus, we learn from Jesus the rituals themselves are not important, but the mental habits, the frame of reference. This is what Paul meant about "rightly dividing the Word" (2 Timothy 2:15), for the Scripture of his day was the Old Testament. Even today, the blessings promised in the Old Testament are largely available to us if we obey the intent of Law, as explained in teachings of the New Testament. Added to this, we have the promise of personal redemption, the presence of the Holy Spirit, Who enlightens our understanding of the Word, and empowers our obedience.