

Truth On Fire

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The Redefining of Iniquity

On Thursday, June 26, 2003 Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia correctly assessed the current climate in America as a “culture war” and verbally chastised the six-member majority of his peers for taking sides by signing on to the homosexual agenda. The battle for our culture—one founded upon the moral absolutes of scripture—has been raging for decades. Moral conservatives have always been quick to identify the high-profile malefactors whom they believe to be guilty of cultural sabotage, such as congressional liberals and activist judges. But there is another sinister force within the enemy ranks that typically flies below most radar screens, whose effect upon American culture is subtler and arguably more devastating. That foe is so-called Christian liberalism—an oxymoron of the first order.

In his second epistle to Timothy, Paul set forth the following mandate as part of God's sure foundation for his church: “*Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity*” (2 Tim. 2:19). The minions of political correctness have more or less succeeded in shaping the national mindset from one of departure to tolerance, and from tolerance to acceptance. Acceptance breeds a sense “diversity” that we are admonished to treasure and celebrate. Now I realize that, technically, politicians and judges do not fall under the biblical mandate because naming the name of Christ is not within their job description, nor are they required to cite biblical authority for laws passed or decisions made. But naming the name of Christ is an absolute requisite for membership in any church that bears his name, and thus departure from iniquity as defined by scripture is mandatory for all its members without regard for their secular roles.

So why is Christian liberalism such a dangerous enemy in the culture war? It is exactly because it can and does invoke the name of Christ and cite biblical authority to support the positions it takes on moral issues. It unwittingly provides a conscience-numbing salve to a culture in degradation by redefining iniquity! So while poll-driven legislators, legal activists, and atheistic humanists are beating the drum of tolerance, here comes Christian liberalism to inform them that God created the homosexual, and that the Bible is essentially silent on matters of same-gender sex within loving and committed relationships. These are clearly lies from the abyss, but garner credibility due to the *ex cathedra* stature of the spokespersons that articulate them.

The ReligiousTolerance.org website presents the basic viewpoints of both Conservative and Liberal Christian theologians regarding what the Bible has to say about homosexuality. Author B.A. Robinson has observed the following tendencies of Liberal Christian theologians when interpreting biblical passages that deal with homosexuality: “They interpret the Bible as having been written by authors who were intent on promoting their own religious and spiritual beliefs. The writers lived in a pre-scientific age, which treated slavery, genocide, mass murder, and the oppression of women as acceptable. Since the scientific study of sexual orientation did not begin until circa 1950, the biblical authors had no awareness of the topic. When the Bible and science disagree, [they] give greater weight to the recent findings of human sexuality

researchers.” It is therefore no surprise to find Christian liberalism promoting homosexual ordinations and same-sex marriages.

Using this post-scientific approach, Christian liberalism for the most part attributes the destruction of Sodom to the violent, abusive, and inhospitable behavior of its citizens towards the angelic visitors. Some concede that attempted homosexual rape might be in view, but all affirm that the Genesis 19 passage has no relevance whatsoever to homosexual activities between consenting adults in same-sex relationships.

The Romans 1 passage suffers similar violence, and Christian liberalism is all over the map. Some allege that Paul was condemning Greek behavior (prostitution) in temple worship. Others say he was condemning homosexual acts that were committed against a person's basic nature, which would also make it sinful for a homosexual to engage in heterosexual acts. Others dismiss Paul's view of homosexuality as outdated, suggesting that Paul would have never written the passage if he had had access to the current research on sexual orientation. Some actually accuse Paul of immoral behavior in writing against homosexuals (i.e., hate speech), claiming that the passage should be rejected as worthless. But again, all affirm that there is no perversion to be found in a “loving and committed relationship” between consenting adults of the same sex.

Brethren, the moral devastation wreaked by Christian liberalism is incalculable! It is one thing for secular leaders to advocate tolerance and acceptance of that which is innately offensive to the moral conscience of a nation. It is quite another for church leaders to aid and abet the secularists by redefining iniquity in such a way that it ceases to wound that conscience! Can there be a more grotesque defilement of pulpit and pew?

Laden with Iniquity

Spiritual perspective with roots in revelation is a rare commodity. Perspective is by definition a point of view derived from subjective evaluation (i.e., seeing the relative significance of objects within the larger scheme of things). Ask one hundred people to offer their personal perspectives on what's ailing America these days, and you'll likely receive one hundred different viewpoints. But if we handpicked one hundred individuals, whose perspectives were governed by biblical revelation, we would find a very high degree of homogeneity. Why? Because the truth enables us to see things as God sees them, and trumps the subjective elements of our personal perspective with objectivity. The result is spiritual perspective rooted in revelation—rare indeed as America moves into the twenty-first century.

One of the great difficulties faced by the Old Testament prophets was the great dissimilarity in perspectives that existed between them and their target audiences. Consider the spiritual perspective delivered by Isaiah to backslidden Israel: *"Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward"* (Isa. 1:4). While the vocative "Ah" expresses the exasperation of God with his people, the phrase "laden with iniquity" is a poignant metaphor that likens Israel to a beast of burden or cargo ship succumbing to and under the onerous weight of sin. As a laden beast, the nation collapses; as a laden ship, it capsizes! In either case, the outcome is disastrous! Biblical history reveals that God's laden-with-iniquity perspective was rejected by a nation immersed in personal perspective!

The spiritual perspective delivered by Isaiah early on in his prophecy appears to have laid the groundwork for the prophetic perspective he later offered regarding the suffering Messiah: *"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all"* (Isa. 53:6). The connection between "laden with iniquity" and "hath laid on him the iniquity" is rather obvious to me. The Lord's invitation *"Come now, and let us reason together"* (1:18) is given a firm foundation—one in which the iniquity of the nation is transferred vicariously to its Founder! Israel is now offered a perspective of grace wherein the nation laden with iniquity is urged to view the Servant of Jehovah laden with that same iniquity on their behalf as *an offering for sin* (53:10). Against the backdrop of grim reality the Lord sets forth his gracious remedy for all who are laden with iniquity. Only those with a spiritual perspective wrought by the Spirit of God, who see themselves as God sees them, will come to the reasoning table with God!

The Lord Jesus took the perspective a step further, saying, *"Come unto me, all ye that labor, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"* (Matt. 11:28). The question arises, "Heavy laden with what?" Well, that's a big umbrella that takes in the cares of life, varied responsibilities, personal tragedies, physical infirmities, etc. But the bottom line is that sinners outside of Christ are laden with iniquity without regard for other hardships they may endure. Men may labor under any number of burdens, but none is greater than the burden of sin! It can be argued that sin is a burden God never intended for man to bear!

Jesus was able to offer himself as the source of rest to those who were heavy laden with iniquity because their iniquities would be laid upon him!

The apostle Paul delivered a last days perspective to Timothy, in which he spoke of men having with a *form of godliness* without power (2 Tim. 3:1-5). He predicted *perilous* (hard, difficult) times characterized by a strong resistance to the truth (3:8). Timothy was told to expect ungodly men to exhibit a form of godliness as a cloak for iniquity, and added: “*For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts*” (2 Tim. 3:6). A prime target of these religious hucksters is the silly (foolish, little-minded) woman whose sins are literally “piled up” in a heap. The phrase *divers lusts* suggests that the vulnerability of such women extends well beyond sexual promiscuity to include all manner of covetous behavior wherein she is easily manipulated. The National Organization for Women—the largest group of feminist activists—is nothing more than an association of silly women laden with sins. The personal perspectives of choice, control, and liberation are in reality a recipe for spiritual slavery!

Brethren, what do you suppose those one hundred handpicked participants with spiritual perspective would identify as America's greatest ailment? In short, she is laden with iniquity! The solution cannot be found in technology, legislation, programs, or federal funding. From a spiritual perspective, the only remedy is the gospel of Christ, which portrays the Lord Jesus as the One upon whom all our iniquities were laid! Apart from revival mercies, America is certain to repeat history, and reject the laden-with-iniquity perspective.

Liberty in Sovereignty

It is entirely biblical and proper for us to think of God Almighty as sovereign. Almightyness is the sister of sovereignty. These two kindred virtues imply that God reigns supreme in his universe, and possesses the wherewithal to impose his will upon it. But sovereignty—if that concept is allowed to have its biblical range of meaning—implies that the God who is able to impose his will upon every facet of creation is also at liberty to withhold at will the imposition of his will without compromising his sovereignty. Theologians who refuse to grant God this liberty in sovereignty create for themselves a quagmire of contradiction, and will (in many cases) resort to demagoguery and insult toward those who do.

Perhaps the focal point for any discussion about the sovereignty of God should be the cross upon which Jesus died. In his infinite wisdom and power, God imposed his redemptive will upon this world without violating the will of any man. As Peter stated in his masterful message at Pentecost: *“Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain”* (Acts 2:23). In no way did (or does) God impose wickedness upon the hands of any man—including Judas Iscariot!

So how do we reconcile the realities of a *determinate counsel* and *wicked hands*? Some argue that a sovereign God predetermined the wickedness of those murderous hands, but such an allegation clearly indicts God as the author of sin. It is enough to classify that mystery under “unsearchable judgments” and “ways past finding out” (Rom. 11:33). The cross is indeed the wonder of historical wonders. A sovereign God in human flesh yielded himself to the will of sinful men and simultaneously executed his own sovereign will in providing a way of redemption for those who crucified him—including us!

The cross of Christ resolved perhaps the greatest dilemma that sovereign God ever encountered, and that is how he could justify sinners (i.e., declare them righteous) and at the same time deal righteously with their sin. To put it laypersons terms, there was no way God could get sinners off the hook without first putting someone else on the hook for their sins. Therefore the gospel entails the following declaration: *“To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus”* (Rom. 3:26). Just and Justifier! What a truth! Nothing less than the death of God Incarnate could keep his righteousness in tact as he went about the business of justifying believers! So the Father made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor. 5:21).

The righteousness of God that comes to the sinner by faith in Jesus Christ is “unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:22-23). The design of the prepositions unto and upon is clear. Jesus became a sin offering for all who have sinned, and offers the gift of righteousness unto all for whom he died. But his righteousness only abides upon those who believe the gospel. Thus sovereign God chose to make a distinction between his righteous provision for sin and the appropriation of righteousness by the sinner. That is, God, as an expression of his sovereignty, does withhold the imposition of his will in the

matter of personal salvation. Do sinners have the ability to believe the gospel apart from the grace of God's drawing? Absolutely not! Can sinners resist and ultimately reject God's drawing grace? Yes, they can! God by sovereign choice has made it so!

In his discourse with Nicodemus, the Lord Jesus clearly distinguished between the provision for salvation and its appropriation (John 3:14-15). Moses lifted up a brass serpent as the remedy for every snake-bitten Israelite. The look of faith brought healing and life. But 23,000 died for lack of faith in spite of God's provision. Likewise the death of Jesus provided a sin satisfaction for the whole world (1 John 2:2), but men for whom Christ died continue to perish for lack of appropriation. Our Lord taught that faith precedes regeneration in the order of salvation, just as looking upon the serpent brought life to snake-bitten Israelites. Jesus taught a look-and-live salvation. The live-and-look heresy of Calvinism (i.e., sovereign regeneration before faith) is one of the many symptoms of sovereignty gone awry.

Brethren, theologians for centuries have bandied about the doctrine of God's sovereignty. For many it has become a line drawn in the doctrinal sand. In affirming the sovereignty of God, however, we must abide by the context of scripture. In Genesis, the Lord proffered acceptance to Cain if he would "do well" in making the proper approach to God. A sovereign God reiterated his inflexible standard of acceptance while refusing to impose faith and obedience upon Cain. Thus by granting to God a liberty in sovereignty, as exhibited with Cain and elsewhere in scripture, we can steer clear of at least one theological ditch.

Great Things from a Great God!

Overused and under-appreciated—two adjectives that could describe any number of personal items we take for granted during a routine day. We might apply those terms to the family sedan, a ten-year-old washer and dryer combination, or that trusty old coffee maker that continues day after day to serve up its delicious brew to our liking. But those two descriptions could just as easily be applied to one of the greatest words in the English language. At the risk of redundancy, that great word to which I refer is the word *great*.

A few moments of reflection reminds us how often writers and spokespersons have employed that word to emphasize the magnitude of something. Successful surgery to remove a malignant cancer is great news; penicillin was a great medical breakthrough; and the defeat of Hitler's regime was a great victory for the Allied forces. The printing press invented by Johann Gutenberg was a great advance in communications, and arguably the greatest achievement of the last millennium. Tony the Tiger has sold enough sugar-frosted flakes to sink a battle ship by convincing several generations of youngsters that "they're grreeeeaat!"

God himself appears to be rather fond of this word since the Spirit of God prompted so many of the biblical writers to use it in both historical and theological contexts to describe the supernatural. Moses penned a mere sixteen verses of scripture before informing us that "God made two *great lights*; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night" (Gen. 1:16). Five verses later he added: "God created *great whales*" (1:21). Moreover, the Lord promised Abram that he would make of him a "*great nation*" and make his "*name great*" (12:2). At this point in history, does anyone doubt what God meant by that word?

Six hundred years later, the nation that had become great (at least population-wise) in Egypt was introduced to another aspect of God's greatness: "Even all nations shall say, Wherefore hath the Lord done this unto this land? what meaneth the heat of this *great anger*? Then men shall say, Because they have forsaken the Lord God of their fathers...the Lord rooted them out of their land in anger, and in wrath, and in *great indignation*" (Deut. 29:24-25, 28). The Lord's capacity for anger and indignation toward covenant breakers is every bit as vast as his creative power and covenant promises—a truth that is virtually absent in our pulpits today!

At no time has God's great power to destroy been more vividly demonstrated than with the Flood. Why did God destroy the earth and all but eight of its inhabitants? It was because "God saw that the *wickedness of man was great* in the earth" (Gen. 6:5). It was great wickedness that brought about the greatest of God's judgments! We are told that in the six hundredth year of Noah's life "all the fountains of the *great deep* were broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened" (7:11). God's answer to the great wickedness of man was the fountains of the great deep, which teaches us that whenever God's great deep clashes with man's great wickedness, the great deep always prevails!

No discussion of great things would be complete without “the *great God* and our Saviour Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). He was (and is) *great light* to the *great multitudes* that sat (and still sit) in spiritual darkness (Matt. 4:16, 25). His appearance on the world stage as the pearl of *great price* was a source of *great joy* for those anticipating his arrival (Matt. 13:46; Luke 2:10). His credits include *great King* (Matt. 5:35), *great High Priest* (Heb. 4:14), and *great Shepherd* of the sheep (13:20). He inspired *so great faith* in a Gentile centurion (Luke 7:9), and is the author of *so great salvation* for all who trust him (Heb. 2:3). His church is a *great house* (2 Tim. 2:20), and he knows how to fill it with *great power*, *great grace*, and *great fear* (Acts 4:33, 5:5). His gospel is able to fill a city with *great joy* in the midst of *great persecution* (Acts 8:1-8), and he opens *great doors* of opportunity for evangelism and church planting (1 Cor. 16:9). In that great day of the Lord, he will judge the spiritually dead from a *great white throne* (Rev. 20:11). Thus David affirmed: “For the Lord is a *great God*, and a *great King* above all gods” (Psalm 95:3).

We previously cited the fountains of the great deep as God’s answer to the great wickedness of humanity. Although a demonstrable truth, it’s not the whole truth! God has since made known to mankind that he has a second answer—a second fountain of great depth—that is able to deal thoroughly with our great wickedness. It is a fountain of mercy that began to flow in the Garden of Gethsemane on crucifixion eve. In the agony of prayer, the sweat of the Lord Jesus Christ “*was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground*” (Luke 22:44). The last of those great drops later fell from his cross as the atonement for the sins of the whole world.

William Cowper was right! There is indeed a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel’s veins; and sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains! What a great God we serve!

In God's Long-Term Grip

There are basically two kinds of investors—the short-term and the long-term. Any competent financial advisor will counsel his or her clients to adopt a long-term strategy, and thereby avoid the emotional roller coaster and monetary losses induced by short-term market fluctuations and impulsive decision-making. But why not apply the wisdom of such advice to life itself? If Esau had operated on that principle, he would have refused to sell his birthright (a long-term asset) for a mess of pottage (a short-term fix). Although Esau and David were light years apart in terms of spiritual orientation, the latter got into serious trouble by jettisoning his integrity for the temporary satisfaction of his lust. In fact, the blunder of David was measurably worse than that of Esau. The point is that maintaining a long-term focus in life is easier said than done, and the godliest of men have the potential to err in this matter.

Israel's history reveals the validity of this principle. The biblical writers routinely contrasted its short-term afflictions with the long-term purposes of God. Psalm 66 is a classic example, and reinforces the long-term perspective that is so essential to running a good race. David writes: *"O bless our God, ye people, and make the voice of his praise to be heard: which holdeth our soul in life, and suffereth not our feet to be moved. For thou, O God, hast proved us: thou hast tried us, as silver is tried. Thou broughtest us into the net; thou laidst affliction upon our loins. Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water: but thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place. I will go into thy house with burnt offerings: I will pay thee my vows, which my lips have uttered, and my mouth hath spoken, when I was in trouble"* (8-14).

In 66:5, David established the primary context of these words as the Red Sea episode. The armies of Egypt had boxed Israel in between the proverbial rock and hard place with no perceptible way of escape. But God intervened with fire (a manifestation of his presence set between Egypt's army and the Israelites) and water (a natural phenomenon transformed into a supernatural escape route). At God's command, they marched onto a dry seabed against all human reason, and watched from its eastern banks as God destroyed the enemy. The army they pictured as riding over their heads rode into oblivion instead. It was a time of testing for Israel. They passed the test, and passed the praise on to the Lord their God. Passing and praising have a unique relationship. Passing sets the stage for praising, but praising is the best preparation for passing!

In Psalm 66:8-14, there are two sets of prepositions that demand our attention. The first introduces its objects with the word "in", and the second uses "into" for that purpose. The first is composed of the phrases "in life" and "in trouble". These realities are not necessarily concurrent, but it is amazing how often they are! Israel was on the cusp of life for the first time in four hundred years, and as a prelude to life found themselves in deep trouble. Doesn't this sound like a woman experiencing birth pangs? David added that God "holdeth our soul" in life (66:9). The word *holdeth* in Hebrew has a wide range of meanings, but in this context could be understood to mean *has a firm grip on*. Armed with that kind of view regarding God's providential care, the child of God who is in

trouble in her or her life is able to exercise trust in the midst of trouble, and wait on God to demonstrate the long-term benefits of his salvation.

The phrases “into the net” and “into a wealthy place” comprise the second set. The *net* speaks of entrapment by a predator, which was exactly the mindset of Israel under the circumstances. Nets seldom lead to wealthy places, but with God all things are possible. You will notice that it was God who brought them into the net before bringing them into a wealthy place. There’s a lot of spurious preaching these days attributing wealth to God and nets to the devil. But God is often the author of both! It was impossible for Israel to escape God’s net by human ingenuity! So before you start rebuking the devil for the net in your life, consider that God may have designed it as a God-glorifying means to spiritual (and perhaps material) wealth. In other words, esteem the Lord Jesus as your single most valuable long-term asset, and avoid the impulsive short-term fixes that tend to short-circuit the long-term benefits of humble trust and patience. By the way, if you make a vow to God while you are in trouble, be sure to pay it when you are out of trouble, lest you incur more trouble!

The importance of a long-term focus in life cannot be overstated. It is the long-term certainties rooted in the Lord Jesus that overshadow the short-term perplexities we so often experience. We must bear in mind that growing weary just might be God’s prerequisite for growing wealthy. We must also be assured that, while we are hurting, God is holding us in his firm grip! That, my friend, is the basis for a long-term focus in life!

The Divorce of Peace and Righteousness

It has become the most drawn out divorce proceeding in history. You would think that the extended length of the litigation would be due to the difficulty of deciding who gets what, since great wealth is at stake for both parties. But that's not the case. Its longevity is tied to the nature of the complaint—irreconcilable differences! The wife is complaining that the husband is just too dogmatic and inflexible. He is intolerable to live with, and she wants out! The husband remains incurably in love, and assures us that, while it may be impossible to live without her, he won't compromise his convictions. The Judge has gone on record as opposing the divorce, and has confirmed that he will deny her petition even though a separation appears to be imminent.

In our analogy, the plaintiff's name is peace, who is seeking a divorcement from the righteousness of God. The venue is the courtroom of American culture. In the sanctified mind, peace and righteousness are the perfect couple. If this unseemly divorce were ever to become final, it would send shockwaves of infidelity throughout the entire world. Peace seeking to make an existence for herself apart from righteousness is like a man depriving himself of oxygen, and expecting the bodily functions to continue as normal. Yet that very scenario is what godless architects within our culture are proposing as a blueprint for America. Peace cannot survive without righteousness, and it is delusory to think otherwise.

The Bible has endorsed this sacred union, declaring, "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Ps. 85:10). The *kiss* is indicative of deep affection, and the Psalmist confirms that peace and righteousness share this mutual affection. But David is not writing about their first kiss. After Abraham had rescued Lot, slaughtering several kings in the process, he paid tithes to Melchisedec, King of Salem. *Melchisedec* means King of righteousness; *Salem* means peace (Heb. 7:1-2). The writer of Hebrews instructs us that Melchisedec, the priest of the most high God, was both King of righteousness and King of peace (i.e., he personified the blessed union of both), and served as the prototype of the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by virtue of his vicarious death for sinners and glorious resurrection from the dead, became a priest forever after the order of Melchisedec (7:17). Jesus is the embodiment of both peace and righteousness. The two first kissed in Melchisedec, and sealed their eternal union with a kiss in the Lord Jesus Christ!

The context of Psalm 85 relates to the captivity of Jacob, and the afflictive chastening of God upon the nation to turn them away from iniquity. The central theme is the *land* (85:1, 9, 12). The Psalmist petitions the Lord to revive his people, that his glory might once again dwell in that land (85:6, 9). As a right-minded leader, David understood that the Lord could never bestow mercy at the expense of truth or peace at the expense of righteousness, but must always bring them to bear in proper balance. For modern-day peacemakers, truth and righteousness appear to be all but irrelevant. In hypocritical and self-destructive fashion, they champion the cause of mercy and peace, but react to truth and righteousness as if they were impediments to the process.

The recent action taken by the Episcopal Church to approve Gene Robinson—a practicing homosexual who divorced his wife and two children to cohabit with a man—for the prominent position of bishop is yet one more indicator that Christendom itself is finding it easier to conduct its business without the constraints of truth and righteousness. It is truly alarming what so-called “fundamental” and “evangelical” churches are willing to do these days for the sake of numbers and a politically-correct reputation for inclusion. Truth and righteousness are often the first casualties of political and religious expediency!

The kiss of Psalm 85:10 is also a prophetic reference to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Never has there been, nor will there ever be, a kiss like unto that one! Jesus made peace through the blood of his cross as an exhibition of righteousness for violations of his holy law. His cross told the truth (with an exclamation point) about God's love for us while we were yet sinners and provided the basis for the mercy he now extends to sinners! It is impossible for any man, woman, or young person to find genuine peace with God without first taking a spiritual journey to the foot of that cross. There they discover the truth and righteousness of God that makes it possible for mercy and peace to flow freely to those who believe the gospel! The same is true for a nation. The bottom line is that true peace cannot be found apart from righteousness!

While many of our leaders continue to engage in the effort to divorce peace from righteousness, let us join our hearts with David in praying that the Lord God will revive our nation, beginning with its churches, and turn back the irreconcilable differences that a humanistic peace has imagined. Her divorce petition has no basis in reality, and the Judge of all the earth is certain to reject it!

Spiritual Power Blackout

The question “Where were you when the lights went out?” is already becoming a standard query as our nation recovers from its worst power blackout ever. It began shortly after 4 p.m. EST on Thursday, August 14, 2003. The Blackout History Project reminds us that this has happened before: “The Great Northeast Blackout of 1965 was part of a massive cascading system failure that, in the span of fifteen minutes, left 30 million people in the dark. The New York Blackout of 1977, which affected a much smaller service area—the metropolitan region—resulted in severe looting and disruption.” During Blackout 2003, however, CNN reports “fifty million people lost power in eight states and parts of Canada.”

The live news broadcasts, which contained overhead video feeds, impressed upon me the magnitude of the problem. Hundreds of thousands of New York City residents were forced to alter their normal after-work routines, pouring into the streets on foot, bringing motor vehicle traffic to a virtual standstill on every major highway, and waiting in line by the tens of thousands to catch a ferry ride across the Hudson River. Watching the aftermath gave cause to wonder why God's people are not equally concerned over the power outages that currently plague our churches. Is not the disruption and loss of spiritual power in the life of a believer far more disastrous than the loss of electrical power in a city?

Experts are saying they don't know exactly what caused the blackout, but preliminary investigations have traced the precipitous event to transmission lines near Cleveland, Ohio. Again, CNN says at “2 p.m. the demands of a hot summer afternoon caused FirstEnergy Corp.'s Eastlake Unit 5, a 680-megawatt coal generation plant in Eastlake, Ohio, to trip off.” Within the next two hours, a series of similar events in Ohio caused a cascading domino effect to affect Michigan, Canada, and New York. In the final analysis, Blackout 2003 will be attributed to a demand for power that exceeded the capacity of the power grid to deliver it.

Blackout 2003 is fertile ground for a comparative discussion of God's power working in his people. Both electrical and spiritual power are necessary for the fulfillment of plans and purposes. Both are capable of cascading effects—positively and negatively. Both are subject to restoration once the cause of the outage is identified. Both kinds of outages can be avoided if preemptive measures are taken to prevent disruption.

To the last point, the Lord Jesus assured his disciples that they would receive *power* after the Holy Spirit had come upon them (Acts 1:8). On the day of Pentecost, which was preceded by a ten-day prayer meeting, they received the *power* he promised (2:1-3). This *power* was the key topic of discussion after Peter and John had healed the lame man at the temple (3:12), and was also a matter of concern for Annas the high priest et al during a post-healing interrogation (4:7-10). Nevertheless, with *great power* the apostles continued to give witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (4:33). When a ministerial controversy arose over neglect of the Grecian widows, the apostles refused to neglect the word of God in the solution process, but kept on giving themselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word (6:1-4). The course of action taken by the apostles was a

preemptive measure to ensure uninterrupted power flow in the face of ministerial challenges. Diminish the Word of God and prayer in the life of any believer or church, and power disruption becomes inevitable!

But they are notably dissimilar in two ways. First, in the matter of spiritual power loss, the cause is always known—a sin of commission and or omission. That is, the child of God has done that which ought not to have been done, or has failed to do what ought to have been done. Secondly, no amount of spiritual power consumption on the part of God's people could ever place the resources of God at risk for "under-capacity" relative to the demand. God's power is as infinite as God himself!

What needs to happen in our churches is a fresh sense of shock over the virtual absence of God's power, coupled with a willingness to abandon our religious routines in response to it. With America experiencing a spiritual power blackout of crisis proportions, how is it possible to remain apathetic? Fortunately, the formula for restoration is identical to the preemptive measure for avoiding disruption. We must return to the Word of God and prayer as our foundation of power, and give due consideration to the things revealed to us by the Spirit—whether omission or commission—within the context of those two activities. And if the Lord Jesus is pleased to visit the church in America with a heaven-sent power restoration (i.e., revival) prior to his coming, perhaps the standard query will be "Where were you when the lights came on?"

No Place of Repentance

With every passing week some watershed event seems to take center stage in our great nation. Last week was no exception. A federal court ordered Roy Moore, chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, to remove a Ten Commandments monument from the rotunda of the state courthouse. He refused. On Friday, August 22, 2003, the nine-member Judicial Inquiry Commission suspended Judge Moore with pay, and referred the case to the Court of the Judiciary, which has the right to discipline and remove judges from the bench.

There is a fitting comparison to be made between the Alabama crisis and infamous Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. That profane act of self-serving indulgence would later bear a hefty price tag, for he was rejected in the bestowal of future blessings, and could find no place of repentance, even though he sought it carefully with tears (Heb. 12:16-17). Can anyone doubt that America is following in the steps of Esau?

In July of 1998, as an Alabama Circuit Judge, Roy Moore wrote and published "Our American Birthright", a poem depicting the spiritual and moral decline of our nation . It reads as follows:

"One nation under God was their cry and declaration,
Upon the law of Nature's God they built a mighty Nation.
For unlike mankind before them who had walked this earthen sod,
These men would never question the Sovereignty of God.

That all men were "created" was a truth "self-evident,"
To secure the rights God gave us was the role of government.
And if any form of government became destructive of this end,
It was their right, their duty, a new one to begin.

So with a firm reliance on Divine Providence for protection,
They pledged their sacred honor and sought His wise direction.
They lifted an appeal to God for all the world to see,
And declared their independence forever to be free.

I'm glad they're not here with us to see the mess we're in,
How we've given up our righteousness for a life of indulgent sin.
For when abortion isn't murder and sodomy is deemed a right,
Then evil is now called good and darkness is now called light.

While truth and law were founded on the God of all Creation,
Man now, through law, denies the truth and calls it "separation."
No longer does man see a need for God when he's in full control,
For the only truth self-evident is in the latest poll.

But with man as his own master we fail to count the cost,
Our precious freedoms vanish and our liberty is lost.

Children are told they can't pray and they teach them evolution,
When will they learn the fear of God is the only true solution.

Our schools have become the battleground while all across the land,
Christians shrug their shoulders afraid to take a stand.
And from the grave their voices cry the victory has been won.
Just glorify the Father as did His only Son.

When your work on earth is done, and you've traveled where we've trod,
You'll leave the land we left to you, ONE NATION UNDER GOD!"

Brethren, it stands to spiritual reason that America, if she continues to sell her birthright to satisfy political expediency, will one day find herself without a place of repentance. Esau teaches us that repentance consists of more than bitter tears and weeping over a lost blessing. It includes the wherewithal to recover the blessing lost. There may indeed come a time when America falls to its knees with bitter weeping over its profane handling of things sacred, only to find that she has forfeited that which cannot be recovered. In other words, America may find no place of repentance, though she seeks it carefully with tears!

No Gospel in a Limited Atonement

In a recent *Proclaimer* publication entitled “Do We Need Another Battle?”, Evangelist Bill Chapman, a dear friend of mine, suggested that the next great battle within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) might be for the Church. In observing that the last great battle was over Biblical inerrancy—a battle ultimately won by conservatives, he opined that affixing descriptive adjectives like “traditional” and “contemporary” to local churches was indicative of confusion caused by the “mixing of truth with error.” He said the unwillingness of SBC leadership to deal with this conflict was “alarming to say the least.”

I agree with his view that these tags of distinction are in fact accommodations to the flesh that tend to distort the biblical concept of worship. But I am inclined to differ with my comrade over the next great battle. In my view, there is another clear and present danger on the horizon that may require a battle for the Gospel itself. If it infiltrates enough pulpits, it will do more harm than any contemporary placard. After all, even a traditional church, if its Gospel is compromised, is little more than a paper tiger!

What is the true Gospel? It is the good news that God in Christ has provided a remedy for our sins. John the Baptist introduced Jesus as “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin [collective singular] of the world” (Jn.1:29). The crux of the Gospel is the cross upon which Jesus died. Paul affirmed that Christ had not sent him to baptize, but to preach the Gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect (1 Cor. 1:17). This affirmation settles two issues. First, it precludes water baptism as an essential element of the Gospel. Secondly, it establishes the cross as its central theme. If we fail to confront lost sinners with the cross, and with Christ as the One who suffered and died for their sins, then we have not preached the Gospel, nor have we evangelized them!

Paul left an inspired record of exactly what the content of his Gospel was—a Gospel he preached to lost sinners across Asia Minor. It was this: “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures...he was buried...he rose again the third according to the scriptures...he was seen (1 Cor. 15:1-5). Paul preached it, sinners heard it, and all who believed were saved by it! It is the same Gospel that Jesus commanded to be preached to every creature. Whether he was preaching to hundreds or a handful, Paul could look sinners in the eye, and declare unequivocally that Christ had died for their sins!

The aforementioned clear and present danger is the supplanting of the true Gospel with one that does not include every man. In theological circles, it is referred to as Limited Atonement or Particular Redemption. It teaches that Christ died for some, but not all. It holds that none for whom Christ died could ever be lost, since God would be a monster of sorts to extract the same penalty from both his Son and the sinner. That is, God would never demand that sin be paid for twice. But what its advocates fail to acknowledge is that God in his word makes a clear distinction between his remedy for sin in the cross, and the appropriation of the remedy by the sinner through faith. Many for whom Christ died have perished in unbelief!

Limited Atonement has been around a long time. Good men have embraced it as well as disavowed it. There is a movement within the SBC to infiltrate as many pulpits as possible with this doctrine. In fact, it has taken over the SBC seminary in Louisville, KY. Its proponents argue that Limited Atonement, properly understood, does not negatively affect evangelism. Perhaps that's true if you consider the message-spreading activity without regard for the message. After all, Jehovah's Witnesses claim that only 144,000 will be saved; yet they continue to spread their Gospel-free doctrine around the world. But the fact is no evangelism takes place if lost sinners fail to hear the good news that Christ died for their sins. Moreover, if Jesus died for some, but not all, there is no Gospel for the others. Since Jesus commanded that the Gospel be preached to every creature, then it follows that every sinner was included in the cross of Christ, the crux of that Gospel.

What is the Gospel being preached at your church? Does the pastor declare with certitude that the death of Christ was inclusive of every man? Is there an unambiguous offer of grace and forgiveness for all through the cross of Christ? If not, the true Gospel is not being preached. A pulpit tainted with limited-atonement doctrine is a clear and present danger in that it reduces certainty to ambiguity, and exchanges the authentic for the anemic. Its message? "Christ [might have] died for your sins!" But according to what scripture?

Under Law or Grace?

The Supreme Court building in Washington has this inscription carved on its eaves: "EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW." Every word is weighty, and together they form the cornerstone of our democracy! The operating principle expressed in that phrase is one of the keys to America's greatness. Any historian or philosopher worth his or her salt could write volumes on the significance of those words. Indeed, many have.

During a recent visit to Washington, I stood in front of that grandiose structure, and took a moment to reflect upon the inscription's meaning. Regrettably, my first thought was the hypocrisy of the Court in sanctioning the slaughter of unborn children through the treacherous act of abortion, denying to them the protections of the very law they are sworn to uphold. The running count is approaching 20 million innocent lives (about 5 thousand per day) that have received neither justice nor mercy at the hands of this Court.

My second reflection had to do with the words "UNDER LAW." I thought about the blessed condition of living in a nation of laws where the government's role (ideally speaking) is to strike a harmonious balance between anarchy and slavery while preserving the personal freedoms of its citizens. The degree to which the Court is doing its part to achieve that goal is the subject of fervent debate these days. What is truly alarming is the growing desire of many Americans to forfeit their personal freedoms in exchange for governmental protections. Students of scripture, however, recognize this trend as setting the stage for antichrist, whose ability to deliver on promises of "peace and safety" will cause the world to follow after and worship him.

My third thought involved the cursed condition of being "UNDER LAW" as defined by the Word of God. Being "under the law" with respect to God means that man is obligated to render impeccable obedience to it, and incurs a fatal liability for breaking it. The Bible says that sin is the result of transgressing God's law, and that the wages of sin is death (1 Jn. 3:4; Rom. 6:23). Death signifies separation. It expresses itself in three ways: 1) physical death—separation of the soul from the body, 2) spiritual death—separation of the soul from God, and 3) the second (or eternal) death—final separation of lost men from the presence of God in the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:14-15). All three are the consequence of sin, and the scripture adds: "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). No rocket scientist is needed to connect the biblical dots. Sinful man in his "UNDER-LAW" condition is in desperate need of mercy, not justice!

No Bible book provides a more definitive analysis of our relationship to God's law than does Galatians. Men are not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ...for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified (2:16). If a righteous standing before God can be obtained by law keeping, then Christ died in vain (2:21). If you fail to continue in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them, you incur the curse of God (3:10). No man is justified by the law in the sight of God...because the law is not of faith (3:11-12). If the inheritance is of the law, it is no more of promise (3:18). "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer

under a schoolmaster" (3:24-25). Oh, what elation and glory is derived from the words "no longer under" by those who have sensed the peril of being "under" God's law with its obligations and curses!

Against this backdrop, Paul declared: "But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). The Lord Jesus, as God Incarnate, took his place under the very law he had inscribed with his pre-incarnate finger upon the tablets of stone hewn from Mount Sinai. As the God-Man, he assumed all the obligations of impeccable obedience, and fulfilled them to the letter. His flawless character and sinless life qualified him to be the Redeemer of those who were in bondage under the law. Therefore all who have placed their trust in the Lord Jesus as the blood sacrifice for their transgressions of his law can proclaim in unison: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us" (3:13).

There is only one alternative to being "UNDER LAW", and that is being "UNDER GRACE"! In fact, these are the only two options available for mankind. We are under the one or under the other. So Paul writes: "For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace" (Rom.6:14). Grace never fosters lawlessness. Coupled with liberation from sin and the imputed righteousness of Christ, grace bestows an empowerment through the Spirit for righteous living. When God transitions the believing sinner from an "UNDER-LAW" to "UNDER-GRACE" position, it is always accompanied by hunger for righteousness! So, being "UNDER LAW" can be a blessed condition or a cursed one, depending on your perspective.

Insights from John Bunyan

John Bunyan (1628-1688) is perhaps the most familiar Puritan name among the ranks of present-day believers. The Encyclopedia Britannica refers to him as “the most popular religious writer in the English language.” He was a man blessed with powerful and vivid imagination. At age seventeen, he enlisted in the parliamentary army. His military experiences left a lasting impression on his thought processes, and thus “he loved to draw his illustrations of sacred things from camps and fortresses, from guns, drums, trumpets, flags of truce, and regiments arrayed, each under its own banner.” His most recognized works are *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Holy War*, and *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. Only the Lord knows how many spiritual sojourners have been encouraged, comforted, and instructed through the written legacy of this man of God.

Included below are a few of his spiritual nuggets. Enjoy!

- “Temptations, when we meet them at first, are as the lion that reared upon Samson; but if we overcome them, the next time we see them we shall find a nest of honey within them.”
- “There is no way to kill a man's righteousness but by his own consent.”
- “God...will not lightly or easily lose his people. He has provided well for us in: a Priest to pray for us, that we may be made to persevere; and, in case we foully fall, an Advocate to plead our cause.”
- “A holy man knows that all sin strikes at the holiness of God, the glory of God, the being of God, and the law of God: and therefore his heart rises against all; he looks upon every sin as the Scribes and Pharisees that accused Christ; and as that Judas who betrayed Christ; and as that Pilate that condemned Christ; and as those soldiers who scourged Christ; and as those spears that pierced Christ.”
- “When thou prayest, rather let thy heart be without words, than thy words without a heart.”
- “Prayer will make a man cease from sin, or sin will entice a man to cease from prayer.”
- “You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.”
- “Wherefore, though the Christian, as a Christian, is the only man at liberty, as called thereunto of God; yet his liberty is limited to things that are good: he is not licensed thereby to indulge the flesh.”
- “If you do not put a difference between justification wrought by the Man Christ without, and sanctification wrought by the Spirit of Christ within...you are not able to divide the word aright; but contrariwise, you corrupt the word of God.”
- “Hope is never ill when faith is well.”

- “Indeed this is one of the great mysteries of the world—namely, that a righteousness that resides with a person in heaven should justify me, a sinner on earth.”
- “No child of God sins to that degree as to make himself incapable of forgiveness.”
- “Do not even such things as are most bitter to the flesh, tend to awaken Christians to faith and prayer, to a sight of the emptiness of this world, and the fadingness of the best it yield? Doth not God by these things oftentimes call our sins to remembrance, and provoke us to amendment of life?”

Engagement of the Heart

The messages of the Old Testament prophets were laden with futuristic content, as would be expected from any spokesperson bearing the prophetic title. Most of their inspired predictions were spoken in the context of national distress. At times God warned Israel of judgment to come as they floundered in spiritual idolatry. On other occasions he assured them of salvation to come as they languished in a land of captivity. God is never slack concerning his promises as men count slackness, but always brings to pass his predictions according to his own sovereign timetable.

The foundation for all prophetic utterance regarding salvation is the Messiah, who was both predicted and depicted through a variety of metaphors. Prior to the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, Jesus was the seed of the woman who would bruise the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). He was revealed to Abraham as the lamb that God would provide himself as a burnt offering—a ram caught in a thicket by his horns (Gen. 22:7-13).

In a prophetic deathbed blessing to son Judah, Jacob envisioned Jesus as Shiloh—the one unto whom God would gather his people (Gen. 49:10). Moses declared: “The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, like unto me; and unto him ye shall hearken” (Deut. 18:15).

David knew him as his Lord [Adonai—master and mediator] to whom the LORD [Jehovah—God the Father] said, “*Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool*” (Ps. 110:1). For Isaiah, he was the child born and the son given, with a shoulder sufficient to govern: whose name would be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6).

Jeremiah perpetuated the governmental theme as he spoke of the Lord reversing “the captivity of Jacob’s tents” and having “mercy on his dwellingplaces” (Jer. 30:18-24). The nation will be established before God. They will engage in thanksgiving, merriment, and population surge. The Lord will punish all who oppress them (30:19-20). The “nobles shall be of themselves, and their governor shall proceed from the midst of them” (30:21). This means that the governor shall have full control of national affairs. He will handpick his supporting cast of nobles without external influences. Unlike the days of captivity, neither men nor nations will be able to impose their will upon Israel. That will be the domain of the governor—the Lord Jesus Christ!

The governor who proceeds from the midst of his people is one whom the Lord caused to approach him, and who “engaged his heart” to do so. What a remarkable and insightful statement! Some might argue that the governor in view cannot be the Messiah simply because the God-Man would have no need of causation in making an approach unto his Father. This argument, however, evaporates in the light of our Lord’s humanity. While Jesus was unquestionably in the form of God, he was found in fashion as a man, took upon him the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:6-8). Though he was the Son, yet he learned obedience by the things

that he suffered (Heb. 5:8). It was therefore necessary for the God-Man to engage his heart. Remarkable!

The insight we gain is that when scripture speaks of God choosing a man, and causing him to approach him, it does not necessarily imply that God must overcome a rebellious or resistant will in the process. David said: "*Blessed is the man whom thou chooseth, and causeth to approach unto thee, that he may dwell in thy courts*" (Ps. 65:4). David was a man after God's own heart from the days of his youth, and was subsequently chosen by God to be king of Israel. David was no doubt speaking of himself in terms of God choosing and causing, and spoke prophetically concerning the Lord Jesus, which Jeremiah affirmed. In neither case is election or causation a matter of personal salvation, but rather of election to gracious privileges sovereignly bestowed (i.e., kingship) and for services to be rendered! Both David and Jesus—the Greater King—experienced the same divine election and causation in their God-ordained roles as kings and spiritual governors.

What does it mean to engage the heart to approach the Lord? The Hebrew root for "engage" means "to braid" or "to intermix." The idea is that of an intricate relationship—a deep and lasting entanglement with God! The word was also used to describe the act of barter—the exchange of values in a negotiation. Engaging one's heart to approach the Lord means that an individual desires a deep-woven relationship with God (one that will weather the storms that tend to disentangle us) marked by reciprocity (the seeker gets grace and God gets the glory). Prayer is our means of approach! Habitual praying alone can keep our entanglement intact!

Have you and I engaged our hearts to approach the Lord? This much is certain. If engagement of the heart was necessary for Jesus the Governor, how much more is it needful for those who are governed?

The Forgiven Who Cannot Forgive

How are your feelings toward France these days? Do you buy French fries or Freedom fries? Unless you just dropped in from another planet, you are well aware of the obstacles that French President Jacques Chirac has erected for the United States and other freedom-loving nations in the war against terror. Critics of the French have rightly remarked that one of the primary causes for bewilderment regarding their attitude is the fact that the blood of thousands of American soldiers soaked French soil in the campaign to liberate them from Nazi tyranny. Such a sobering observation gives rise to the following question: "How can a liberated nation harbor such disdain for its liberator and disinterest in the liberation of others?"

That noise you just heard was a chorus of angry Americans shouting, "Yeah, that's exactly right!" I admit it's rather easy to jump on that bandwagon. It is flat out unseemly for the liberated to oppose the liberation of others, or to default in their responsibility to do so when an opportunity to return the favor presents itself. But why stop with the French? How about the child of God who has experienced liberation from the tyranny of Satan through the precious shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ? Is he or she any less worthy of rebuke for an apathetic or disinterested attitude toward lost sinners? Again, how can those who have been liberated from the devil's power act indifferently toward those who are still enslaved by him?

Let's expand that thought by asking another closely related question: "How is it possible for the forgiven to withhold forgiveness from others who sin against them?" Jesus warned against the dangers of an unforgiving spirit. It has the potential to induce personal misery, render the offending believer ineffective in his or her walk with God, and eventually ruin the life. The tiny seed of unforgiveness can become a tumultuous sea of torment if allowed to sprout and take root in the heart.

On one occasion, Peter approached Jesus with this question: "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times?" (Matt.18:21). Peter was no doubt unprepared for his Lord's response: "Until seventy times seven" (18:22). Peter probably figured that a capacity for forgiveness that extended to the seventh offence was more than adequate, but discovered that, according to Jesus, his vision for granting forgiveness to an offending brother was woefully inadequate. By multiplying by a factor of seventy, Jesus was stripping any and all limitations from one's capacity for forgiveness.

What followed was an illustration of forgiveness that concluded with one of the most profound teachings of Christ (18:23-35). A debtor servant owed a certain king ten thousand talents. Unable to pay the debt, the lord commanded that all his possessions (including him, his wife, and his children) be sold, and that the proceeds be used to pay the debt. As an act of desperation, the soon-to-be-impooverished servant went into worship mode, and pleaded for patience. He struck a compassionate chord in his lord, who responded by forgiving him the entire debt, and leaving his family and possessions in tact.

At some point thereafter, the forgiven servant found one that owed him one hundred pence, and demanded payment. The debtor likewise pleaded for patience, but the forgiven one refused to grant the same grace that had been afforded him. Well, word of his unseemly behavior got back to the compassionate lord, who called him to account, labeled him a wicked servant with neither compassion nor pity, and in anger delivered him to the tormentors until his debt was paid. Then came this startling conclusion: "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses" (18:35).

Have you ever wondered why some Christians always seem to be under duress, and constantly struggle with relationships? They complain about how everyone is always giving them a hard time, including the spouse, the kids, the boss, the neighbor, a coworker, etc. Oftentimes these same people, when engaged in argument, will pull up thirty-year-old offences as justification for their anger against another. Events that are decades removed from the present are recounted with a freshness of fervor that would make one think they happened yesterday! It seems they are totally incapable of forgiving or forgetting!

The forgiven that cannot forgive live in continual torment. It is flat out unseemly, but is nevertheless a fact of life for many of God's people. An unforgiving spirit is a satanic device. If successful, it puts the believer at a severe disadvantage in spiritual warfare (2 Cor. 2:10-11). The scripture commands us to forbear and forgive one another: if any has a quarrel against any, we should forgive even as Christ forgave us (Col. 3:13). We therefore conclude that the forgiven who withhold forgiveness are no less indictable than the liberated who refuse to deploy their resources for the liberation of others!

The Showbiz Mentality of Ministry

The church at Corinth was a congregation blessed with an abundance of spiritual gifts. According to Paul, they were "in every thing enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge" as a manifestation of the grace of God (1 Cor. 1:4-5). But this church had big problems. In modern socio-speak, they were a dysfunctional family. In matters of congregational worship, Paul expressed a great deal of concern over the misuse of spiritual gifts, and provided specific guidelines to govern their God-ordained use. One area of concern was the gift of tongues, for which Paul dedicated a lengthy portion of his first epistle (chapter 14).

A careful reading of that text (within its broad context) reveals that many Corinthian believers had developed a showbiz mentality (i.e., gifts on display) in conducting the business of God. Showbiz may be serious business in New York and Hollywood, but has no business in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. So Paul begins his prefatorial remarks by advocating a spirit of love (unselfish devotion to Christ and others) that would temper the desire for spiritual gifts (14:1). But he did not stop there! He added that the most desirable gift was prophecy--the God-given ability to articulate spiritual truth in understandable terms.

The prophetic gift operating in a Spirit-filled man tends toward edification, exhortation, and comfort (14:3). In other words, it builds people up by admonishing them to embrace clear courses of action, and encourages them to do so with the very passion of God! Contrariwise, no one but God understands that which is spoken in tongues (supernatural speech in another language) unless a Spirit-filled interpreter is present to render the meaning (14:13, 27). Tongues apart from an interpretive intervention lack the power to edify anyone except the speaker. Therefore prophecy is the greater (and most desirable) of the two gifts (14:4-5).

Later in the chapter, Paul draws the following practical distinction between the two gifts as they operate in a public forum: "If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth" (14:23-25). The stated objective of God-anointed prophecy is for truth to become so convincing and salient to an unbeliever that it will evoke a worshipful response that attests to the manifested presence of God! I submit to you that finding this kind of church in America is like finding a needle in a haystack. Is this the prevailing atmosphere in your church?

In a recent opinion piece entitled "Is it in God or Dow we trust?", syndicated columnist Cal Thomas cited excerpts from sociologist Alan Wolfe's book *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith*. Thomas writes: "Wolfe, a self-described non-believer, reaches some sobering conclusions. After traveling the country observing various denominations and religious services, Wolfe writes: 'Far from living in a world elsewhere, the faithful in the United States are remarkably like everyone else.'

C.S. Lewis called this 'contented worldliness,' which he said is the great enemy of the church. Wolfe says that religion in the United States 'has never existed in practice the way it is supposed to exist in theory' and that in the battle between faith and culture, 'American culture has triumphed.' Wolfe hands down a stinging indictment of contemporary Christianity: 'Talk of hell, damnation and even sin has been replaced by a nonjudgmental language of understanding and empathy.'

Thomas further cited an article on Forbes' website written by Luisa Kroll "that provides further evidence of the corruption of the contemporary church." The essay is titled, "Megachurches, Megabusinesses." Thomas writes: "It begins: 'Maybe churches aren't so different from corporations.' Kroll lists big churches that have recording studios, publishing houses, computer graphic design suites, satellite networks, and huge TV budgets. 'Welcome to the megabusiness of megachurches,' writes Kroll, 'where pastors often act as chief executives and use business tactics to grow their congregations.'"

It is painful to consider how "remarkably like everyone else," "aren't so different from corporations," and "business tactics" have come to represent the sentiments of unbelievers toward the church at large rather than "God is in you of a truth." The task of reversing this trend may be painful as well, for it will require a godly sorrow and brokenness before God on the part of many who have taken a showbiz approach toward the work of Christ! If the pain of brokenness, however, can precipitate genuine revival, it will be worth far more than it costs! But who is willing to pay the price?

Alcohol: A Lethal WMD

The search continues for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). We know for certain that Saddam used WMDs to kill thousands of his own people, and have ironclad evidence that the tools for producing them were still in tact at the onset of the war. There are three explanations for why they remain undiscovered. (1) They were transported to sympathetic neighbor nations. (2) They were buried in the desert regions of Iraq. (3) They were destroyed with a view to replenishing them at a later date. The fact is we may never find them.

What about the costs (human and financial) of the Iraqi war? Since March 20, 2003, the death toll for Coalition forces stands at 381. Another 1,789 U.S. soldiers have been wounded. The Pentagon estimates that, by the end of September, the war will have cost \$58 billion. The White House is requesting an additional \$87 billion for troop support and reconstruction. Yes, the costs we have incurred in terms of human casualties and financial resources are indeed disconcerting!

But is America's leadership really serious about finding and destroying WMDs? Are you aware that a certain WMD has been wreaking havoc in America for decades, and continues to destroy human life and foment misery at a rate and cost that eclipses the war in Iraq? That WMD is the alcohol in legalized liquor! According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), an estimated 17,419 people died in the year 2002 in alcohol-related traffic crashes—an average of one every 30 minutes. Eighty percent of these deaths were related to beer consumption. In 2001, more than half a million people were injured in crashes where police reported that alcohol was present—an average of one every two minutes.

Statistics from 2001-2002 lead us to project that 3,400 or so Americans have died on our highways since the war began, and 97,200 have been injured—all because of alcohol! In 1998 dollars, the costs of underage drinking alone were estimated at \$58 billion. The cost in 2003 dollars, if we calculated every alcohol-related calamity within all age groups, would range in the hundreds of billions! Where's the outrage? Where's Congress?

Perhaps the relevant question is: "Where is the Church?" I am amazed at the number of professing believers that drink alcohol, and justify imbibing beer or wine on occasion by saying, "I never get drunk." But God says, "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise" (Prov. 20:1). Listen to the prophecy of king Lemuel's mother: "It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink: Lest they drink, and forget the law, and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted. Give strong drink to him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more" (Prov. 31:4-7).

Some argue that Jesus made fermented wine at Cana of Galilee, and that Paul told Timothy to drink a little of the same for his ailments (John 2:1-11; 1 Tim. 5:23). But was it fermented wine? Hardly! Hear the prophet Habakkuk: "Woe unto him that giveth his neighbor drink, that putteth thy bottle to him, and makest him drunken also, that thou

mayest look on their nakedness” (Hab. 2:15). Do you think for one moment that Jesus would give alcoholic wine to those wedding guests, and risk the destruction of the Godhead if just one guest had one too many? Would Paul prescribe alcohol to Timothy, knowing the biblical warnings and potential dangers to the young preacher? Think again!

What then is the mind of God about drinking alcohol? First, it has the potential to destroy men and women. No sane man would keep a rattlesnake in his home, and justify it by saying, “I never get bitten.” Secondly, any attempt to justify the use of alcohol is evidence of foolishness and deception. Total abstinence alone precludes the possibility of drunkenness and perverted judgment. Thirdly, one’s deathbed (with its miseries) is the one occasion that might justify strong drink. Alcohol is no doubt a lethal WMD, and should be avoided by any believer with the first lick of biblical sense!

The Need for Quality Demolition

Urban sprawl is a phenomenon that goes hand-in-hand with explosive population growth. It can be likened to a rising river at flood stage, whose intrusive waters extend far beyond their former boundaries. In most cases, urban sprawl is set on an inevitable collision course with its rural surroundings. Developers who buy outlying tracts of land for the purpose of building new communities for residents desiring to distance themselves from the hustle and bustle of the urban center frequently encounter old dilapidated houses and farm buildings that must be torn down to make way for the new. As the entrepreneurial spirit would have it, urban sprawl has given birth to a business that specializes in the business of tearing things down—the demolition expert!

I was reminded of this fact last week while taking a therapeutic walk through my neighborhood. In front of an overgrown lot on a main thoroughfare was a sign that read, "Quality Demolition." Someone is going to build something on that piece of land, and hired a demolition expert to tear down a structure in disrepair before building a new one. It's a common practice these days for subcontractors to put up signs telling passersby who it is that's doing the work. This demolition expert was no exception. Are you thinking what I thought when I first saw the sign? Right! How do build quality into the work of demolition?

As I continued my walk with thought processes triggered, it dawned on me that God himself is in the quality demolition business. Paul wrote these words to the Corinthians: "For though we war in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:3-5). The phrases "pulling down" and "casting down" both come from the Greek **kathaireo** (**kata** = down + **haireo** = to demolish). Paul was flat out serious about spiritual warfare, and saw demolition as an integral part!

In these words, Paul was reaffirming his apostolic authority for the benefit of some who reckoned that he was nothing more than one religious man who differed with other religious men on issues of holiness (10:2). Paul was essentially saying: "I am a God-ordained warrior, who just happens to have the God-imparted power to pull down (demolish) strongholds and imaginations, if need be, to put your spiritual house in order when I get there!" Paul employed the word once more at the end of the epistle to clarify that the primary purpose of his God-given power was to edification, and not to destruction (13:10). No pastor worth the salt in his bread would prefer demolition to building. But in some cases it is unavoidable. That which sets itself against the knowledge of God must be demolished before new spiritual structures can be built in the hearts of men!

The Lord delivered the following prophetic commission to Jeremiah: "See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant" (Jer. 1:10). Two-thirds of his ministry was to be geared toward tearing things down as a prelude to building and

planting. Make no mistake! In matters spiritual pertaining to Israel and its neighbors, Jeremiah was God's demolition expert! Read the pages of his prophecy, and you'll find an unpopular man with a mere handful of friends, who was in no danger whatsoever of suffering from an inflated ego. I am quite certain that Jeremiah would have preferred to focus upon the building and planting aspects of ministry, but God typically does not provide his prophets with a list of pick-and-choose options. Ask John the Baptist!

Now, back to our question. Is it possible to perform quality demolition? Consider these examples. Jesus demolished a legion of demons in the Gadarene maniac, and left him sitting, clothed, and in his right mind. As a result, he testified throughout Decapolis the great things that Jesus had done for him (Mk. 5:1-20). On the road to Damascus, the glorified Christ demolished the ignorance and unbelief in one Saul of Tarsus, and transformed him into the apostle to the Gentiles and the author of thirteen (arguably fourteen) inspired NT books. And what discussion about demolition would be complete without the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ? It was there God the Father laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6), and where he became sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor. 5:21). Yes, God knows how to demolish sin and its strongholds. And when he does, who can question the impeccable quality of his work?

I suspect that a number of God's people could use some quality demolition these days. The sanctification process (i.e., advancements in holiness as a matter of spiritual sprawl) demands that old things be torn down before new things are established. Dilapidation may appear as wrongful acts, bad attitudes, or untoward lust. In any case, quality demolition performed by the Spirit of God is essential to our spiritual development!

The Separation of God and State

On October 14, 2003, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the Pledge of Allegiance case regarding the recitation of the phrase “under God” in public schools under the jurisdiction of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Opponents of the pledge argue that coercing school children to recite or even hear the pledge is emotionally detrimental, and violates the first amendment. A ruling is expected by June of 2004.

Christians with their finger on the pulse of our culture realize that the current flap over issues of church and state is nothing more than a pretext on the part of secular humanism for expunging God from governmental affairs. The Florida Times-Union published a letter last week that was typical of the misinformation used by humanists to advance their cause. I was compelled to respond, and have included my response below:

“A recent letter writer weighed in on the ‘under God’ phraseology in the Pledge of Allegiance by averring that the constitution, not what most Americans believe about the matter, should rule in this controversy. I agree with the sentiment that the constitution is the law of the land, and should therefore turn a deaf ear to majority whims unless majority opinion can be mobilized to amend it by a three-fourths majority of the states. But there are two statements made by the writer with which I take issue.

“The first is the assertion that ‘we are not a nation under God, but a nation under the constitution.’ Language such as this presupposes that ‘under God’ and ‘under the constitution’ are mutually exclusive concepts. But are they? The fallacy in his allegation is a total disregard for the historical context in which our founding fathers crafted the constitution. The Declaration of Independence, set forth by the original thirteen states on July 4, 1776 (eleven years before constitutional ratification), is the Constitution’s paternal predecessor. It is rather easy to discern from that document an unmistakable sense of dependence upon God as they undertook to ‘dissolve the political bands’ that had connected them to England. They argued that ‘the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God’ entitled them to a ‘separate and equal station.’ The language is brilliant, for it makes God both superior to and author of the laws by which men govern themselves. For the framers, it would have been impossible to be under the constitution without being under the God whose very law gave it legitimacy.

“The second is that ‘the constitution also bans theocratic governance.’ Nothing could be further from the truth. The framers affirmed the self-evident truth that ‘all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.’ It is abundantly clear that, in the minds of the framers, the sole justification for the Bill of Rights was the God-given endowments to the governed. They further added: ‘To secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,’ and ‘whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.’

“So here is the framers’ mindset. The Creator—if not God Almighty, who could it be—is the recognized author of those unalienable rights with which he endows every human soul. Governments exist to secure those God-given rights for the governed. If the government becomes destructive of these ends (which would include the divorcement of God from constitutional law), the God-endowed people have the right to change it, abolish it, or replace it. In other words, the people have a right to be governed by laws that affirm the ultimate governance of God over his creation. If the writer is correct, it’s time for a new government!

“A cursory examination of the Declaration of Independence, as the precursor and moral basis of constitutional law, reveals an affirmation of theocratic governance rather than its ban. Both statements of the writer, when considered in the context of constitutional origins, could themselves be deemed unconstitutional! The first amendment does forbid the congress from enacting any law respecting the establishment of a state-sponsored religion. But that’s a far cry from the government (and the God-endowed governed) acknowledging God in a public forum for his sovereign and benevolent endowments!”

Brethren, all efforts to disavow theocratic governance (as exemplified above) will ultimately fail. Because we know the word of God, we understand that every current historical movement is on a collision course with a sovereign God (i.e., the Lord Jesus Christ) who will destroy his enemies, and impose his theocratic rule upon this earth. We take great comfort in that certainty, but also find cause for great concern and alarm in this truth: “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God” (Psalm 9:17).

Nobility without Purity

The United States of America is once again in the business of nation building. In fact, we have a fairly decent track record for doing so. After the Second World War, we rebuilt Japan and Germany, and are now in the process of doing the same for Afghanistan and Iraq. Nation building is an arduous and often frustrating task. Ask Nehemiah!

Ezra and Nehemiah were men of God whose responsibility it was to oversee the rebuilding of a nation that was destroyed by the Babylonians seventy years earlier. Ezra was skilled in the scriptures, and gave himself to the spiritual education of God's people. Nehemiah was a God-gifted administrator who was committed to rebuilding Jerusalem's infrastructure for the glory of God. They worked in tandem to accomplish those goals.

One of the key objectives in nation building is to discover and develop a core of national leaders. As one reads through the chronicles of Nehemiah, it is readily apparent that his greatest challenge (or obstacle) consisted of those whom he referred to as "nobles." That word is found nine times in the book of Nehemiah (KJV), and is translated from two different Hebrew words.

The Hebrew word **chowz**, which signifies that which is *white* or *pure* (from the cleansing or glowing power of fire), is used seven times (2:16; 4:14, 19; 5:7; 6:17; 7:5; 13:17). It derives from **charar**, which means *to glow, melt* or *burn*, and is used figuratively to describe that which *shows* or *incites passion*. Nehemiah used this word to distinguish these men by societal rank, but more than mere rank is in view. National leaders—the nobility in the best sense of that word—are expected to exhibit a burning passion for God and personal purity in their leadership roles, and by example incite the same passions in those they lead!

The second Hebrew word used by Nehemiah to describe the national leadership is **addiyr**, meaning *wide* or *large*. In the figurative sense, it means *powerful*. It derives from **adar**, which means *to expand*. It refers to those who have risen to positions of power by expanding themselves personally and influentially. Nehemiah uses this word on two occasions (3:5; 10:29). He is not referring to two different kinds of leaders, but rather to the same leaders from two different perspectives. The ideal leader is one whose passion for God and personal purity is the foundation of his power and influence in society. I believe we are safe in assuming that Nehemiah expected nothing less from the nobles in Israel who had returned from Babylonian captivity. But for Nehemiah the nation builder, there was a disconnect between the expectation and the experience.

When the time finally came for Nehemiah to share with the people what God had put in his heart to do for the city of Jerusalem, he assured them that the hand of God was upon him, and proclaimed, "Come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach." They responded, "Let us rise up and build" (2:17-18). But "their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord" (3:5). The problem with these men is still with us today—position without passion!

Nehemiah included the nobles in subsequent admonitions, encouraging them to put fear aside and fight for their brethren, because God himself was fighting for them (4:14, 19-

20). But the nobles, rather than fighting for their brethren, were exacting usury (excessive taxes) from them for personal gain, and inducing a great deal of discouragement. Nehemiah set a great assembly against them, rebuked them publicly, and convinced them to restore that which had been confiscated by abuse of power. The nobles agreed (no doubt reluctantly) to give the people a tax refund as well as tax relief going forward (5:7-13). My kind of government!

Now that the nobles were no longer able to profit from their confiscatory tax policy, they pioneered business initiatives (creating a virtual farmers' market) that were conducted on the Sabbath day within the city gates. Once again Nehemiah found himself in contention with these men over their profane behavior and total disregard for things sacred. It obviously slipped their minds, but their evil business practices threatened to bring more wrath upon Israel (13:17-18). Alas this problem is also with us today—position without purity!

Brethren, all of us long for nobles within our national leadership who will bring godly passions and personal purity to the positions they hold. God knows America could use a little nation building in this area, and only he knows if that day will ever come. But nobles are needed in two additional areas of our culture that are every bit as critical as our national leadership! Those two areas are our homes and our churches! If these two institutions lack godly passions and personal purity, can we expect anything more from the nation at large?

A Biblical View of Ignorance

Ignorance is defined as an absence of knowledge. Some have proffered the idea that ignorance is bliss. I will admit there are times when a plea of ignorance can provide a temporary escape from an inconvenience or aggravation. But most of us have discovered through the school of hard knocks that ignorance is seldom a blissful condition. The fact is the potential downside for ignorance far exceeds any advertised upside. Ask any of the millions of unemployed in this nation would it would mean to have a better knowledge, skills, and abilities profile to attach to a resume. Knowledge is not everything, but it beats ignorance a thousand ways!

The Bible looks at ignorance from several perspectives. It is noteworthy that while the word *ignorance* is found thirteen times in the OT scriptures, it is confined to just three chapters that deal with ignorance in the commission of sin (Leviticus 4-5; Numbers 15). The same Hebrew root is used in each instance. It is **shagah**, meaning to stray, to mistake, to transgress, or to reel (because of mental intoxication or enrapturement that results in deception). The biblical concept of ignorance with respect to sin implies that the cognitive processes are short-circuited by lust, causing one to sin inadvertently or without premeditation.

The OT teaching on sin through ignorance sets forth the following truths. 1) Sin committed in ignorance is against of the commandments of the Lord and his holy things—Lev. 4:2, 13, 22, 27; 5:15-17. 2) Anointed priests and rulers are capable of the same ignorant blunders—Lev. 4:3, 22. 3) Individuals and nations that sin through ignorance are nonetheless guilty before God, and bear their iniquity—Lev. 4:13, 22, 27; 5:17. 4) Sin through ignorance is a forgivable offence if the guilty one makes the proper approach to God through blood sacrifice—Lev. 4:20, 26, 35; 5:16, 18; Num. 15:24-29. 5) Transgressors often become aware of sin through ignorance at a later time—Lev. 4:13-14, 23, 28; 5:17. 6) Presumptuous sin (or willful disobedience with eyes wide open) is the antithesis of sin through ignorance, and incurred the death penalty—Num. 15:30-31. It is no wonder that David prayed, “Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins” (Ps.19:13).

The apostle Paul made it his business to eradicate ignorance. He informed the Romans that he had oftentimes purposed to visit them, but was hindered (Rom. 1:13). Ignorance of his intentions might have paved the way for doubts regarding his love for them. He also cited ignorance of God's righteousness as the culprit for the spiritual plight of Israel in rejecting Christ (10:3-4), and warned that ignorance of God's future plans for Israel might lead to Gentile conceit (11:25).

In Corinth, ignorance of spiritual truth depicted in the wilderness wanderings might cause them to lust after the same evil things that brought spiritual calamity to Israel (1 Cor. 10:1-6). Moreover, ignorance of spiritual gifts was creating confusion in their midst (12:1). He expressed concern over their ignorance of the sacrifices he had made on their behalf (2 Cor. 1:8), but disavowed any ignorance of Satan's devices, especially in the area of unforgiveness (2:11). In Thessalonica, ignorance of the nature of physical death for the believer might lead to hopeless sorrow rather than a blessed hope (1 Thess.

4:13). Paul reminded the Ephesians that the Gentiles were alienated from the life of God through spiritual ignorance, which was once true of them (Eph. 4:18). Paul saw ignorance as a perilous condition, but always considered it a curable one, and used himself as the prime example (1 Tim. 1:12-13).

In these last days prior to our Lord's coming, we can expect two distinct phenomena to take place in relation to ignorance. The first is that of secular religion exhibiting willful ignorance of the word of God (2 Pet. 3:5). As in Noah's day, humanity is moving steadily toward its date with destruction. But the self-appointed gurus, who deny the historical veracity of scripture, continue to mock the idea of accountability to Almighty God, and dismiss the need to be prepared to meet him in judgment. The second is the disciples of Christ being called "unlearned and ignorant men" by these same secularists for articulating biblical truth with boldness and passion (Acts 4:13). If living in the presence and power of Jesus elicits an accusation of ignorance from an ungodly world, then we should wear it as a badge of honor as did Peter and John!

Brethren, surely our hands are up in this matter of ignorance! We most readily confess our shortcomings in the knowledge of God and his holy things. While there is no bliss to be found in such ignorance, the situation is never hopeless! Why? Because the Lord Jesus Christ—the high priest of every believer—has an infinite capacity for *compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way* (Heb. 5:1-2). He is the source of wisdom for our ignorance, forgiveness for our failures, and mercy for our miseries! Amen!

Is Image Really Everything?

Tennis superstar Andre Agassi, acting as pitchman for a well-known camera maker, used these three words as the hook in his commercial script: “Image is everything!” That affirmation was intended to pack a powerful appeal to a society fixated on appearances. But in the real world, image seldom counts for everything, and in some cases counts for absolutely nothing! In the spiritual realm, however, it can be argued that image was and is a key factor behind the redemptive mission of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The image to which we refer is the image of God that the Creator built into man his creature! As the sixth day of creation moved toward conclusion, God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (Gen. 1:26-27). The Hebrew word translated *image* signifies that which has a resemblance to something else—a representative figure. The word *likeness* also speaks of resemblance, but comes from a root meaning *to compare*. That is, if God and man were set side-by-side for comparison, we would see a resemblance so strong as to suggest that the greater was the pattern for the lesser.

The biblical teaching of man being created in the image and likeness of God precludes the idea that man was God's equivalent as a “little god” or that the creature was endowed with deity. The Fall of man into sin and death through disobedience demonstrates that the resemblance of Adam to God did not include a potential culpability for sinful acts. Man became a living soul when God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, but that's a far cry from possessing a spark of divine life or deity, as is alleged in some theological circles.

The Fall was devastating for Adam and his descendants, plunging them into spiritual death, darkness, and blindness. Moreover, it placed man under a divine curse mandated by the holiness and justice of God. But the Fall did not eradicate the image of God in man. In a context regarding the power of the tongue, James states: “Therewith bless we God, even the Father, and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God” (Jas. 3:9). The reference to *men* is generic. James is referring to men in general (including women) without regard for spiritual status. Whether we curse saved men or lost, we are cursing one who retains the image with which he was created. Yes, the image is corrupted, and sometimes marred beyond recognition! But the image remains! Paul concurred: “For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God” (1 Cor. 11:7). Any doctrine of depravity that obscures this fact is deficient!

The doctrine of redemption centers upon the entrance of the second Adam—the Lord Jesus Christ—into his created world (1 Cor. 15:45-49). Jesus was “the image of the invisible God” and “the express image of his person” (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). But as Paul pointed out, Jesus was bearing the image of the heavenly, not the earthly. Did he possess a spark of divine life? No! In him dwelled all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Col. 2:9). Forget the spark! He was the full manifestation of divine life! The glory of his person, if allowed to emanate through his humanity, is unbearable by man! The image of

the second Adam is impeccable with no potential culpabilities, and therefore qualifies him to be Redeemer and Mediator for his fallen creatures.

The gospel of our salvation is all about image as well. Paul reminded the church at Corinth that the god of this world routinely blinds the minds of unbelievers “lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Cor. 4:4). In Paul’s mind, the preaching of the gospel included an emphasis upon the divine and sinless image of our sin substitute. The unmistakable inference is that Jesus, the image of the invisible God, died for the sins of every unbeliever that Satan blinds! Else there’s no gospel to hide, since the gospel exists *only* for those for whom Christ died! Moreover, life eternal for every believer is assured by the fact that God “did predestinate” his elect to be “conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). As John said: “We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn. 3:2). Meanwhile “we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).

We therefore conclude that image plays a key role in things spiritual, including the creation of man, the Fall, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the cross, the resurrection, the gospel, and our final glorification. Even from the moment we believe until we see Jesus, there is a progressive transformation of that corrupted image from glory to glory that takes place through the ministry of God’s Spirit. So, perhaps the hook does apply after all for the child of God. As for our sojourn in the spiritual realm...image is everything!

A Study in Powered Flight

The December 2003 issue of *Popular Mechanics* magazine displays this headline: “100 Years of Powered Flight.” The feature article recounts the “aviation milestones” that took mankind into space after Wilbur and Orville Wright successfully flew the first powered aircraft on December 17, 1903, at Kitty Hawk, NC. The cover immediately tweaked my interest due to my experience as a Navy air crewman and plane captain as well as flight line electrician for a major airline. I most readily confess my fascination with high-powered jet aircraft—F-14 Tomcats, F-15 Eagles, F-16 Falcons, F-18 Hornets et al. The Space Shuttle is in a class all by itself! Witnessing the explosive power of these extreme machines as they perform vertical climbs, dog fighting maneuvers, and high-speed passes at the local air show is exhilarating...and almost addicting!

But I'm wondering. If we refer to 100 years of powered flight as its Centennial, what term would we use to describe 6,000 years of powered flight? A Hexmillennial? No, I'm not getting ahead of myself. That's about how long God has been in the business of providing high-powered flight for his servants! God has no need of gas turbines, afterburners, and booster rockets. He simply speaks the word to make powered flight a reality!

Enoch is the first man in scripture of whom it is said that he “walked with God” (Gen. 5:21-24). Enoch had a wholehearted desire to please his Lord, which lead him to order his lifestyle in a manner that was consistent with holiness. By the way, God is still looking for Enoch-like men, women, and young people with whom he can interact daily on an intimate basis. Enoch was the father of Methuselah, whose death brought the waters of the Flood, and the great grandfather of Noah, whose family occupied the Ark of salvation. God “took him” at age 365. The writer of Hebrews tells us he was “translated” (Heb. 11:5). The Greek word means *a change in position*. God transitioned him from the confines of earth into his personal presence, making him the first man to venture into outer space!

The Lord took Elijah the prophet up into heaven by a whirlwind, making him the second man to defy the gravitational forces of earth and avoid the taste of death (2 Kings 2:1-11). It is clear from the passage that God spoke to Elijah beforehand concerning the method of transportation. But what was the whirlwind's magnitude? I am inclined to believe it more closely resembled a roaring west Texas twister than one of those innocuous whirlwinds that might kick up a little dust and a few leaves in an open field. I like to think that God exceeded Elijah's expectations by sending a chariot and horses of fire in addition to the whirlwind. It was a flight for the ages and a foretaste of things to come!

The Lord Jesus experienced powered flight at his ascension. Like Enoch and Elijah before him, he was “taken up” as if the Father had a firm grip on him. But he also “went up” as if he needed no assistance other than his own sovereign prerogative (Acts 1:9-11). Unlike Enoch and Elijah, Jesus was taken up *after* he had tasted death vicariously for every man, and was resurrected from the dead victoriously on the third day. As the disciples gazed up into heaven, two men in white apparel proclaimed this blessed hope

to his followers: “This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.” So, the ascension was just the first leg of a supernatural high-powered flight, the second leg of which will bring him back to this earth to destroy his enemies and establish his kingdom!

In articulating this blessed hope, Paul informed the Thessalonians that “*the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord*” (1 Thess. 4:16-17). Every believer, whether alive or asleep in Christ, will be “caught up together” to experience with Jesus the second leg of this high-powered flight! We will be in the air under divine power! The Lord Jesus will make the high-powered flight of his people possible with just three words—“Come up hither!”

Brethren, the tradition of powered flight that God began 6,000 years ago with Enoch, continued with Elijah, and epitomized in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, will one day be our experience as well! What lasting significance can we find in 100 years of powered flight when we stand to enjoy an eternity of supernatural high-powered flight courtesy of the Author and Finisher of our faith? Now there's something to add to your Thanksgiving list—the high-powered flight that is yet to come!

The Corruption of a Culture

On November 18, 2003 the Massachusetts Supreme Court, in a 4-3 split decision, ruled that denial of marriage to homosexual persons violates the state's constitution. The Court gave the state legislature 180 days to alter its legislation to reflect the court's decision. That ruling, which came just days after Alabama Supreme Court chief justice Roy Moore was banished from the bench for affirming that he would always acknowledge God in judicial proceedings, has ratcheted up the volume of dissent against judicial activism.

Judicial Watch, the public interest group that monitors the judiciary, issued the following statement from its president, Tom Fitton, in response to the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling:

“This is what the U.S. Supreme Court has wrought. The Massachusetts court decision forcing the people of Massachusetts to recognize homosexual marriages flows directly from this year's Supreme Court Lawrence decision, which granted the right to engage in sodomy fundamental constitutional protections. Now that the Supreme Court has established this right, it was inevitable that another court, as in Massachusetts, would mandate recognition of homosexual marriages.

“Today's Massachusetts ruling, though, is on a collision with the federal Defense of Marriage Act, which protects states from being forced to recognize homosexual marriages permitted by other states. It is likely the U.S. Supreme Court will now have to decide the controversy — whether states and the federal government are constitutionally required to recognize same-sex marriages. Traditional marriage in America is one Supreme Court decision away from destruction” (www.judicialwatch.org).

President George W. Bush has vowed to “do what is legally necessary to defend the sanctity of marriage.” But that statement makes two tenuous assumptions. First, it assumes that defending its sanctity is equivalent to preserving it. Secondly, it assumes that the legal system can dictate the course of culture. The facts argue against both assumptions. George Will observes: “More than 40 percent of America's first marriages end in divorce. Cohabitation by unmarried heterosexual couples has risen rapidly from 523,000 in 1970 to 4.9 million today. Procreation outside of marriage, although the seedbed of millions of individual tragedies and myriad social pathologies, has lost much of its stigma now that 30 percent of births — including about 60 percent of births to women younger than 25 — occur to unmarried mothers.” The statistical reality regarding the sanctity of marriage in America tells us that Humpty Dumpty has incurred a great fall! But is it safe to assume that laws can do what the culture has undone? Absolutely not!

The antidote for a corrupted culture is truth! The dominant culture in America bears a strong resemblance to that which dominated Israel in the days of the Judges. When Samuel came on the scene, the word of the Lord was precious [rare], and there was no open vision (1 Sam.3:1). That is, the nation lacked sufficient revelatory channels through which God's truth could go forth with power and authority! Joshua and his spiritual cohorts served that purpose admirably, but that generation passed from the scene, and

“there arose another generation after them, that knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel” (Judges 2:10). The result was a nation where “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (21:25).

Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli, were serving as the priests of the Lord in Shiloh (1 Sam.1:3). Together they embodied both religious and political authority. But neither knew the Lord, and therefore abuse of office and moral perversion marked their tenure (2:12-22). Now there is some merit in holding these wicked men (at least in part) responsible for the cultural corruption that existed in Israel. But it is likewise true that these men were the reflection of a culture that, for all intents and purposes, had become a God vacuum! It is a vicious cycle! Godless generations produce the godless men that lead them, who in turn tend to perpetuate and perpetrate that same godless spirit upon their generation. The Lord reversed the cycle of corruption in Israel by installing a sanctified leader rather than enacting a new law! Samuel laid the groundwork for David, whom God used to bring his truth once again to center stage as the antidote for national corruption!

Brethren, I have no problem with the enactment of laws that affirm what is right in the sight of God. No government should ever sanction sin. But legal acts that preclude the sanction of sin are as powerless to purify a corrupted culture as the men and horses that worked in vain to restore Humpty Dumpty. The only solution available to America at this hour is the truth of the Living God — proclaimed unapologetically in power from our pulpits and lived out unashamedly in the lives of those who claim to know him!

Insights from Robert Leighton

Robert Leighton (1611–84) was one of the great Puritan preachers, but seldom accounts for a blip on the modern-day radar screen. At age thirty (1641), he became a Presbyterian minister. During the next twelve years, he established his reputation as a gifted Scottish preacher, and in 1653 was made both principal and professor of divinity at the University of Edinburgh. He became bishop of Dunblane in 1661, and archbishop of Glasgow in 1669.

The historical context in which he ministered was marked by a bitter battle between the Episcopalians and Presbyterians for control of the Church of Scotland. Leighton appears to have been non-partisan in the struggle, being torn between his loyalties to the Episcopalians (his position) and the Presbyterians (his doctrine). The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition states: "Leighton's attempts to find a basis for union between Presbyterianism and episcopacy led to accusations of treason by the Covenanters and to lukewarm feelings on the part of the Episcopal party." Leighton was apparently a peacemaker at heart! Any modern-day believer who takes a biblical position between the philosophical extremes of Calvinism and Arminianism is likely to endure the same accusations and lukewarm feelings!

The Cambridge History of English and American History concurs: "By the simple beauty of his life, he gave visible expression to the idea of true tolerance, which no one in all the seventeenth century more sincerely advocated and more fully exemplified. He was, at the same time, one of the great preachers of his day. His style is simple and dignified, abounding in aphorism rather than in epigram, powerful yet not rhetorical: its excellence is the reflection of the spirit within" (<http://www.bartleby.com/218/1207.html>). Tolerance is a much-needed commodity in today's theological war zones. Leighton possessed it in spades, and the Church of Scotland was the richer for his gracious spirit! O for the emergence of a few more Leighton's in our day!

In 1674, Leighton retired to private life. His collected writings, including many of his sermons, appeared in several editions after his death. A handful of excerpts are provided below. Enjoy!

- "Adversity is the diamond dust with which Heaven polishes its jewels."
- "This [covetousness] is the greatest foolishness and disease especially of old age, that the less way a man has to go, he makes the greater provision for it. When the hands are stiff, and fit for no other labour, they are fitted and composed for scraping together."
- "How can you affright him [the believer in Christ]? Bring him word his estate is ruined; 'Yet my inheritance is safe,' says he. Your wife, or child, or dear friend is dead; 'Yet my Father lives.' You yourself must die; 'Well, then, I go home to my Father, and to my inheritance.'"
- "The carnal mind sees God in nothing, not even in spiritual things. The spiritual mind sees Him in everything, even in natural things."

- “God’s choice acquaintances are humble men.”
- “Men compare themselves with men, and readily with the worst, and flatter themselves with that comparative betterness. This is not the way to see spots, to look into the muddy streams of profane men’s lives; but look into the clear fountain of the Word, and there we may both discern and wash them; and consider the infinite holiness of God, and this will humble us to the dust.”
- “The Christian and the carnal man are most wonderful to each other. The one wonders to see the other walk so strictly, and deny himself to those carnal liberties that the most take...And the Christian thinks it strange that men should be so bewitched, and still remain children in the vanity of their turmoil, wearying and humoring themselves from morning to night, running after stories and fancies, and ever busy doing nothing; wonders that the delights of earth and sin can so long entertain and please men, and persuade them to give Jesus Christ so many refusals—to turn from their life and happiness, and choose to be miserable, yea, and take much pains to make themselves miserable.”

Actionable Intelligence

Actionable intelligence—two words that war-savvy spokespersons are now using to describe the information that launched the latest search for and capture of Saddam Hussein. Actionable intelligence is crucial data (in this case, tips gathered from local Iraqis sympathetic to Coalition forces) upon which action is taken to achieve a goal. In Saddam's case, the goal of apprehension was achieved. The Butcher of Baghdad is now in custody, and on a collision course with a war tribunal for his atrocities against mankind.

On the other hand, it is a lack of actionable intelligence that accounts for the still-at-large status of Osama bin Laden. Moreover, our national security agencies might have thwarted the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 if they had had actionable intelligence concerning the plan to hijack fuel-laden commercial airliners, and crash them into high-profile targets. So we see that actionable intelligence, while extremely valuable, is not always available. But such is not the case in the spiritual realm.

Is not the Lord our God a boundless repository of actionable intelligence? If omniscience means anything, it signifies that there is not one iota or speck of intelligence that exists beyond the realm of divine awareness. The wonder of wonders is that God has chosen to make known to mankind a plethora of intelligence about himself and his gracious acts of intervention into world affairs—past, present, and future. The “crucial data” of which we speak is the revelation that is God's inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word. It's safe to say that the intelligence contained therein is eminently actionable!

The scriptures reveal that God frequently takes courses of action based on his intelligence. The Lord God walked through Eden in the cool of the day searching for the two members of fallen humanity—Adam and Eve—based on his knowledge of their joint disobedience. The promise of a Redeemer—the seed of the woman who would bruise the head of the serpent—was made based on actionable intelligence; that is, the Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world (Gen. 3:8-15; Rev. 13:8). The sacrifices that God instituted on behalf of fallen man as a means of approach to him by faith were nothing less than actionable intelligence. Abel took the proper action, and found acceptance with God. Cain rejected that intelligence, operated on his own terms, and found himself rejected by the God who had graciously provided it.

How did Noah go about building the Ark of salvation for his family? Actionable intelligence! The same may be said of Moses building the Tabernacle. By the way, the Ten Commandments that God chiseled in tablets of stone with his omnipotent finger comprised a body of actionable intelligence for the Israelites, and to the world at large by dissemination. Israel obeyed them to its benefit, and rejected them to its detriment. I am persuaded that the recent removal of the Ten Commandments from the Alabama state courthouse as well as the pervasive substitution of “Holiday” for “Christmas” in many of the season's festivities are signs that America is going the way of Cain in rejecting the actionable intelligence that a gracious God vouchsafed to her by providence. It is impossible to adopt Cain's outlook without incurring Cain's outcome!

The Lord Jesus conducted a successful evangelistic encounter with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well due to actionable intelligence (Jn. 4:1-30). In her eyes, Jesus was no more than a non-prejudicial Jewish man with a few enigmatic lines until he uttered these words: "Thou hast well said, I have no husband: For thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly" (4:17-18). He knew her completely, and articulated it. She perceived immediately that he was a prophet (4:19), and mere moments later realized that she was in the presence of Messiah (4:26). Now *she* was armed with actionable intelligence, which drove her to leave her waterpot, race back into the city, and say to the men: "Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" (4:29). They came as requested, and many were saved! The episode teaches us that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not only actionable intelligence for a spiritually thirsty world, but can produce a cascading or domino effect in those who are affected by it.

What would have been your opinion of our military in Iraq if they had been in possession of this actionable intelligence, and then failed to act upon it? To state it mildly, they would have been accused and guilty of abysmal if not treasonous neglect! As believers who are engaged in spiritual combat, you and I are awash with actionable intelligence where the truth of Christ is concerned. Are we taking appropriate actions based on that intelligence? This much is certain! The spiritual future and well being of America is absolutely and totally dependent upon the actions taken by the people of God in response to the actionable intelligence he has provided for us in the scriptures.

The Chief of Sinners

Does Paul's claim to be the chief of sinners still stand? The Saddam and Osama dramas currently playing themselves out on the world stage (plus the myriad of wicked men that preceded the diabolic duo since Paul made that claim) would seem to render obsolete any such designation for the apostle (1 Tim. 1:13-15). After all, to be the chief of sinners is to be top-ranked in that category—the worst of the worst! So, if the world of sinners had a Vile Championship Series (VCS), Paul would be in the title game every year—and win! Yes, there would be some close games, but the outcome would always be a “W” for the former Saul of Tarsus.

Paul prefaced his claim to chiefdom by declaring that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. His claim was a crescendo of sorts. Jesus went fishing...and caught the biggest fish! These words were no doubt meant to encourage pastor Timothy in his evangelistic efforts. The reasoning: If Jesus came to save sinners, and has already netted the chief among them, then no sinner is unsaveable...Saddam and Osama included! If all sinners are saveable, it follows that Jesus died for all, for no sinner is saveable if God made no atonement for that individual through the death of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's connect the dots.

After man's fall, God made coats of skins to clothe Adam and Eve prior to expelling them from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:21). Adam and Eve were a microcosm embodying the whole world at that time! In making a provision for sin through the death of a substitute, God was figuratively and prophetically making atonement through the death of Christ for the ten billion or so men and women that would proceed from Adam's loins. Therefore Isaiah affirmed: “The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6). The words “us” and “all” refer to all who have gone astray, to every one who has turned to his or her own way. If we allow these words to have their obvious meaning, Isaiah envisioned every single member of the fallen human race!

John the Baptist concurred, for when he saw Jesus coming unto him, he cried: “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29). Jesus affirmed the same to Nicodemus: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (3:14-15). God provided the brass serpent as an object of faith and a means of healing for those who were snake-bitten (Num. 21:4-9). God made provision for all who were perishing, but many for whom God made provision died for lack of looking in faith upon that provision. So, when Jesus continued with, “For God so loved the world”, and drew a distinct parallel between snake-bitten Israelites and sin-bitten humanity, he clearly defined the “world” as the sum total of those who were perishing as a result of sin. In others words, if you are a sinner, you are loved by God, who himself became the provision for your sin. All that stands between you and life eternal is a look of faith towards the One who loved you and gave himself for you! Beware of any man who brings his theological wrecking ball to the “world” of John 3:16, and dishonors Christ by excluding even one of the perishing that he included!

Paul was in that “world” of perishing, sin-bitten sinners for whom Christ died. He stated that Christ died for those who were sinners, without strength, and ungodly (Rom. 5:6-8). He reasoned that the death of Christ for all proved that all were spiritually dead (2 Cor. 5:14-15). Therefore Christ died for all who were spiritually dead. If Christ did not die for all men, those for whom Christ did not die were not spiritually dead. Neither were they sinners, nor ungodly, nor without strength, nor gone astray, nor turned to their own way, nor perishing. Jesus said he came to seek and to save that which was lost (Lk. 19:10). If there were some for whom Christ did not die, then they were not lost. Since all men died spiritually and were lost in the fall, it follows that Jesus died for every man without distinction or exception. Have we connected enough dots?

In the same epistle to Timothy, Paul declared: “We trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, especially of those that believe (1 Tim. 4:10). “All men” represents the same “sinners” that Christ came into the world to save! In his death on the cross, Jesus represented sinners—all of them—and ordained that faith would be the delimiting factor in those who are saved and those who are lost! Adam knew this to be true, as did Moses, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostle Paul, and John the beloved, who declared that Jesus was “the propitiation for our sins” and “for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn. 2:2). I marvel that some men make it their business to gainsay this biblical truth, and gut the gospel in the process!

Paul was indeed the chief of sinners, but why? My sense is it was the extraordinary degree of light that he rejected and trampled over in executing his atrocities against the church, and against Christ himself. In spite of their wicked and ungodly acts, neither Saddam, nor Osama, nor any of their ilk down through the centuries have sinned in the manner and to the extent that Paul did. Yet there was an unfathomable depth, breadth, and height in the mercy of God provided by Christ in his death for every sinner that eclipsed and by faith erased the sins of their chief! O what a Saviour, and what a Christmas message for a lost and dying world!

The Case for Christian Ambition

Ambition—an eager or strong desire to achieve something. It's a trait commonly associated with those who are climbing the corporate ladder of success! Its presence in an adolescent is praiseworthy, and its absence a cause for concern. People who have it tend to make measurable progress in life. Those who lack it seem to do little more in life than tread water or spin their wheels. In short, ambition is considered to be a sign of good mental health and a key determinant of success.

The same may be said of spiritual ambition. In fact, the apostle Paul by inspiration unequivocally declared his own set of spiritual ambitions in his letter to the Philippians (Phil. 3:3-21). He began with a vote of “no confidence” in those achievements he had wrought as an ambitious Pharisee—a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He had undergone a total transformation of mindset. He shifted the former “gains” of his religious quest to the “loss” column, having replaced them with “the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus” his Lord. Paul came to encapsulate his spiritual ambition in these five words: “That I may win Christ.” So all who ventured to ask him about his willingness to be “troubled, perplexed, persecuted, cast down, and delivered unto death” (2 Cor. 4:8-11) in his course of ministry might expect to hear that five-word rejoinder.

All of this gives fresh meaning to the idea of ambition, does it not? Consider the next five words: “And be found in him.” To “be found” implied that someone was looking for him with a view to finding him in a particular state. That someone was Christ! The same may be said of us as believers. For what was his Lord looking? For a righteousness—not his own, which is of the law (external conformity to a rigorous set of rules and regulations)—which is of God by faith (internal dependency upon Christ that unleashes spiritual power to perform righteous acts in his strength as opposed to our own).

Paul went on to restate his spiritual ambition with another five-word phrase: “That I may know him!” It is one thing to know Christ in precept, but quite another to experience him in fullness of power! The power God displayed in the resurrection of Christ is the same power available by faith to every believer for doing righteous acts. Paul previously described this principle as working out your own salvation with fear and trembling with the result that God would be working in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure (2:12-14). The fact is God is not working in us to will and do of his good pleasure if we are not trusting him in the process of working out our salvation. Paul suggested that “murmurings and disputings” were in the works at Philippi. But both are incompatible with faith, and neither constitutes God's will and good pleasure.

Paul's crowning ambition was to achieve (to the extent possible) in this life what he knew could only be achieved by his own personal resurrection from the dead—the moment at which his vile body (and ours as well) would be fashioned like unto Christ's glorious body (3:11, 21). Sinless perfection is an impossibility in this life. It is, however, a praiseworthy pursuit! We should seek to apprehend it because is exactly that for which Christ has apprehended us (3:12). Paul had impeccable character and an unblemished track record, but disavowed the apprehension of perfection. Yet he was single-minded in his pursuit of it. By forgetting the past with its achievements and failures, and reaching forth

to seize the challenges and opportunities that Christ would place before him, he pressed on toward the mark for the prize (2:13-14).

Paul had cultivated the mindset of a marathon runner. The race he ran was a trek, not a sprint. He was not “perfect” in the sense of resurrection-like perfection (2:12), but was “perfect” in the sense of a spiritual and Christ-like maturity (2:15). Such maturity is marked by the marathon mindset. Those that are “thus minded” have come to grips with their gains and losses. They hunger for faith-based righteousness, refuse to settle for less than resurrection power, and endure suffering gladly if it means a deeper and sweeter fellowship Christ Jesus their Lord. They reckon death to self as the door to abundant life. They give themselves to what lies beyond rather than what could have been! They never see a half-empty glass! They continue to follow after and press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Brethren, as we approach a new year, let us do so with a marathon mindset. Let's petition God afresh for a spiritual ambition of the proper sort, and to help us achieve some previously unachieved task for his glory! Let's determine together that we—by the grace of God—will seek to apprehend that for which Christ has apprehended us. Let's refuse to live in the past! Let's trust the Lord to work out his will and good pleasure in us as we endeavor to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, trusting in the Lord with all of our hearts, and leaning not unto our own understanding.