

Truth On Fire

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The Life-Giving Love of the Father

Our physical birth marked the beginning of a growth process. That process consisted of increasing levels of awareness. At some point in that process, we became aware of our social status, whether upper, middle, or lower class. In most cases, we were proud of our station in life, our heritage, and our parents, who were largely if not totally responsible for the food we ate and the clothes we wore. Some were perhaps less appreciative of their roots, and others learned to despise their heritage. In today's "enlightened" society, some children have resorted to litigation in an attempt to divorce their parents. Well, I did not have perfect parents, and would have changed a few things. But I always was (and still am) proud to be the son of Harry and Grace Roberts.

Our spiritual birth into God's family similarly marked the beginning of a growth process. But the increasing levels of awareness told a far different story. In the Lord God Almighty, our spiritual progenitor, we have come to find no shortcomings, no hang-ups, no defects, no regrets. There is but one class—the heavenly. There is but ONE Father who is THE Father of all who believe. We are his sons and daughters by virtue of a spiritual birth that took place the moment we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ!

The apostle John tells us that the driving force behind our spiritual life is the love of the Father: "*Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not*" (1 John 3:1). *Sons* is from the Greek **teknon**, signifying the child who is the object of parental love. In biblical terms, it is the love (**agape**) expressed by the heavenly Father toward his spiritual children. God's love toward his children is both unconditional (it was not waiting for some cause or credential in its objects) and sacrificial (it spared no expense in the rescue of those objects). Moreover, no child of God has ever found him- or herself unwanted, abused, or neglected!

According to John, this life-giving love of God has four (4) key attributes. The first is its importance. *Behold* is an imperative that demands our attention for what is to follow. John uses it on multiple occasions in his Gospel and Revelation, but only once in his first epistle. The singular usage conveys a dominant theme. John is saying: "Don't miss this! Grasp its greatness! Never take it for granted! Stay focused on this theme—one that is worthy of earnest contemplation and subsequent motivation for living in a world ravaged by unlovely things!"

The second is its transcendence. The phrase "what manner of" is the translation of the Greek **potapos**, whose origins meant "what soil?" then "what country?" and then "what sort?" The word contemplates something that is beyond the realm of (or foreign to) previous experience. It was exactly the impression left upon the disciples by Jesus as he turned a "great tempest" into a "great calm" with a word of rebuke. They exclaimed: "*What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him*" (Matt. 8:24-27). It was something new to their senses, something they had never before experienced. So John declares to his readers that the love shown by the Father toward believers in his Son transcends any and all worldly loves. Charles Wesley so wrote: "Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heav'n to earth come down." Of unique interest is that John wrote

his first epistle about 60 years after seeing Jesus ascend to heaven. Six decades of ministry had failed to diminish one iota in John's mind the wonder of the Father's love toward his children!

The third is its permanence. *Bestowed* is the perfect tense of the Greek verb **didomi**. The verb generally refers to a giving (or bestowal) born of good and free will without coercion. The perfect tense signifies a past action with abiding results. The bestowal of the Father's love upon his children is an eternal commitment on his part. Once bestowed, it remains a bestowal. So Paul, in speaking of God's love as a permanent fixture in our divine benefits package, affirmed that no power on earth or in heaven would be able to separate us from it (Rom. 8:38-39). This love is at times exciting, nurturing, guiding, teaching, encouraging, and forgiving. At other times it is correcting, disciplining, and chastening. But at all times it is a bestowed love that will not let us go!

The fourth is its severance. The fact that we have a new nature as a result of the new birth means that we assume the same relationship with the world that Jesus had. The world did not know him (on an experiential level), and therefore, because we are his, our former relationship with the world has been severed. The implantation of his nature should make a difference in our behavior. The effect of life-giving love should be a new lifestyle. So the world just cannot relate to those who are related to the Father through his dear Son. That's why the local church is so important! It provides the opportunity for those who are "other-worldly" in their life focus to rally around their common heritage. And what greater commonality is there than the life-giving love of the Father?

The manner of love that the Father has bestowed upon those of us who believe is totally foreign to our worldly experience. The Father reckons us to be and calls us his children—the children of the Most High! What a love! What a privilege! What a bestowal! What a motivation for 2005!

A Priceless Possession

There's much talk of peace in today's world, but that much-sought commodity is in continual short supply. The recent election of Palestinian President and Arafat successor Mahmoud Abbas has political pundits speculating afresh about the prospects for a peaceful relationship between Jews and Arabs in the Holy Land. The scriptures, however, reveal that whatever measure of peace is obtained prior to the Day of the Lord will be short-lived: "*For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape*" (1 Thessalonians. 5:3).

Inherent in that inspired biblical foresight is the acknowledgement that peace both was and will be a prominent (and ultimately dominant) theme as we journey into the last days. How would you respond tomorrow morning if your local newspaper or favorite news-oriented website posted the following headlines: "Chinese Leadership Disavows Communism: Seeks American Guidance to Establish Democratic Republic", or "Osama Bin Laden Declares Cessation of Terrorist Acts", or "Oil Prices Plummet to \$20 a Barrel as Arab Nations Praise America as Global Peacemaker." Let your imagination extend the list.

My guess is that these or other similar-sounding headlines would produce a tsunami of planetary good will and send financial markets soaring into the stratosphere. Talk about your water fountain fodder! The liberal media would probably cringe over such an outbreak of peace-oriented euphoria because it would make America look good. But all of these scenarios, if they were indeed to become reality, would pale comparison to a single sinner entering into a peace relationship with Almighty God. Peace with God, my friend, is a priceless possession—a possession to be sought by men above all other possessions!

The matter of peace with God prompts two important questions. First, what is peace? The prominent Greek word is for peace is **eirene** (Eng. Irene). It comes from the root **eiro**, which means *to bind*. The concept of peace with God therefore suggests to us the binding together of God and the sinner in an eternal relationship. There are two sides to the coin of that royal relationship: the absence of hostility and the presence of harmony. One of my professors at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. Reginald Barnard, made the following statement in class one day regarding peace with God: "There is a negative tension that exists between God and man because of God's holiness and man's sinful rebellion. Peace is the removal of that tension!" Well said!

The magnitude of that tension is nowhere better understood than at the cross upon which Jesus died. As a matter logical assumption, a given tension must be broken or overcome by a greater tension. Would any of us venture to hook and land a 500-pound ocean tuna with 10-pound test fishing line? The fact that God's tackle box for his plan to redeem fallen man from sin included an incarnation of himself and the shedding of his sinless blood on behalf of sinners speaks volumes about the degree of tension that existed between holy God and sinful man! It goes without saying that God was packing

the proper tackle to deal with that tension and land the sinner. The Bible says that God in Christ "*made peace through the blood of his cross*" (Col. 1:20).

Secondly, how does a sinner obtain it? The scripture says: "*Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Rom. 5:1). So, peace is obtained by a declaration on God's part in response to a expressed dependence on our part. Justification is the act of God whereby he declares (as the sovereign legal authority in his universe) the believing sinner to be righteous before him. It is far more than if we had never sinned. God actually clothes the sinner in his own righteousness as a gift of grace. As a result of this declaration, the tension between the Righteous Judge and the guilty defendant is both resolved and dissolved.

Faith brings the sinner before the Judge empty-handed with an appeal for mercy. Faith is not a work to be done, but rather the sinner approaching the Court of Heaven empty-handed with this mindset: "Nothing can for sin atone, nothing but the blood of Jesus!" Such an acknowledgement is the fruit of grace, without which the sinner cannot believe!

Of all the negative tension that exists in our world, none is greater in terms of its magnitude than that which stands between and separates holy God and sinful man. But God in mercy has provided the answer in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ and his resurrection from the dead! His precious blood can wash away the sins of the believing sinner, and dissolve the tension. The peace (removal of tension) that comes to us as a result of faith in the Lord Jesus is a priceless possession above all others! Is it yours?

The Pauline Spirit of Optimism

In a conversation with a good pastor friend some years ago, this man of God proceeded to tell me all the reasons why his church was not growing (i.e., had one foot in the grave). His rationale included a brief history of the church, a rundown on how the church had treated each pastor, how the church was treating him, the less-than-healthy reputation the church had established within the community over the years...all of which were designed to explain the absence of conversions, no visitors, and the 25-30 average attendance each Sunday. Sound familiar? I had no stones to throw at this brother, having been caught in the same trap more than once in my ministry.

Our conversation impressed upon me how easy it is to rationalize our failure or lack of progress in kingdom work, and how adept we can become at making excuses for the same. It must be said, however, in defense of true men of God everywhere, that preachers often tell the truth when caught in those traps. Imagine if we had approached Moses in the wilderness twenty years beyond the Red Sea experience, and asked him why he was not able to get Israel into the Promised Land. He might have responded: "Because I'm pastoring a bunch of faithless, stiff-necked whiners, that's why! And I just might not be the man to get them there!" Moses would have spoken the truth with both of those statements, and the Lord would have agreed!

The apostle Paul, as Moses of old, was a man well acquainted with hardship. He encountered more than his share of enemies in the world and detractors in the churches. Nor was Paul always successful as men count success. But in every circumstance, Paul maintained an amazing spirit of optimism, as expressed in these words: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13). By the grace of God, this spiritual combat veteran transformed every prospect of dying into a doorway for living!

The "all things" of which Paul speaks covers a wide range of potential scenarios within the scope of God's revealed will and those things that please him (Jn. 8:29). In some cases he had plenty (abounded), and in others he simply did without (was abased). But in every case he discovered the Lord afresh, working his will and infusing his grace! Paul, like you and I, was not always able to dictate the circumstances under which he served the Lord. But he did achieve mastery over his attitudes, actions, and reactions. All things were doable!

The phrase "through Christ" calls attention to the instrumentality of the Lord who lives within. He was not present when Jesus told his disciples, "For without me ye can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5), but we can rest assured that Paul both got the word and lived it out on a daily basis. There is no possibility of spiritual success apart from the instrumentality that Jesus brings to the believer.

With Super Bowl XXXIX fast approaching, let's suppose you receive a phone call from an NFL honcho, who asks if you would like to be the starting quarterback for the AFC Champion. After you realize the guy is on the level, you say, "Are you nuts? There's no way (other than in my dreams) that I could perform on that level!" But he answers, "We will perform a procedure that will give you the legs of Michael Vick, the mind of Peyton

Manning, the arm of Donovan McNabb, and the toughness of Brett Favre. How about it?" So, you suit it up with the AFC Champs, and lead them to a Super Bowl victory. At the press conference, a myriad of stupefied reporters want to know how you did it. You lean into the microphones, and say, "Through Michael, Peyton, Donovan, and Brett." And so it can be said for every spiritual conquest or achievement—"Through Christ!"

The companion of instrumentality is strength. The verb *strengtheneth* is a present participle, which speaks of an ongoing action. Since Christ is God, and God possesses infinite strength, the Lord Jesus is in himself a boundless reservoir of might and power from which the believer can depend and draw upon by the day, the hour, the minute, and the moment. We as God's people need to get a fresh vision of that vastness, and attach ourselves to it! That's the only way to nurture the Pauline spirit of optimism that can do all things!

A Biblical Look at Neglect

As part of my frequent walks through the surrounding neighborhoods, I observe how folks take care of their lawns and the landscaping in general. Now, I don't live in a gated community where every yard has an irrigation system and a lawn care company to maintain it. In the circuits I walk, there are some residences with virtually weed-free lush lawns and well-manicured trees and shrubs. Others have been taken over by crab grass, dollar weed, and or any number of other Northeast Florida lawn wreckers where the trees and shrubs look like they've never been pruned. Others are somewhere in the middle of those two extremes, suggesting to an observer like me that several rounds of a good weed-and-feed fertilizer, combined with systematic watering, mowing, and edging, would move them into the upper echelon of lawns.

In my mind, just one word is needed to explain the condition of those inferior lawns—neglect. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines neglect as “failure to give the proper attention or care to something as a result of carelessness, oversight, ignorance, or disregard...the habitual lack of care.” In a nutshell, that is exactly how a showcase lawn atrophies into a fair, poor, or bad one. Furthermore, the neglected lawn provides a near-perfect analogy to the child of God who finds his or her spiritual life overrun with the weeds of worldliness. The glitch in our analogy is the inability of believers to outsource the care of their spiritual lives to a third party.

There are several biblical references to neglect where the primary Greek word **ameleo** is used. These passages command our attention. **Ameleo** is a combination of the negative prefix **a** (without) and **meleo** (to care for). So, to neglect something is to have no care for it (or fail to care). But root meanings alone are insufficient to capture the full weight of a word. That comes from the context or passage in which it is used. Let's examine a few.

The first finds our Lord using the word in a parable to describe the response of invitees to a marriage supper put on by a King for his Son (Matt. 22:2-14). After the king had dispatched the initial set of servants to call his guests (who subsequently refused to come), he sent a second set with a more detailed description of what was being offered as an enticement. But “they made light of it, and went their ways” (22:5). The phrase “made light of” is the translation of our verb **ameleo**. It is an aorist active participle. An expanded translation might read: “Having considered the King's business and that of his Son to be of little or no consequence, they gave full attention to their own business.” The context clearly implies that neglecting the King's invitation was equivalent to rejecting it for the pursuit of personal priorities.

In our second passage, the writer to the Hebrews asks: “*How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation*” (Heb. 2:3). The larger context extols the Son through whom God has spoken (1:2), and to whom he has ascribed Godhood with a throne fitting for his majesty (2:8). He is also the Creator (1:10). Salvation is embodied in the Son...no, make that great salvation...no, make that *so great salvation*! Jesus articulated it, the Holy Ghost confirmed it, and the Apostles dispersed it throughout the Roman Empire and beyond! The gospel message of so great salvation cannot be neglected without a decided disregard for its claims. There will be no escape from the judgment of God for

those who neglect it. This second passage is a companion to the first. Both were intended for Jewish audiences regarding the seriousness of neglecting God's business where his Son is concerned!

In our third passage, we find the Lord God neglecting Israel: "Because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord" (Heb. 8:9). The context discusses the covenant of old under the law and the covenant that is yet to come, when God shall put his laws into their minds, and write them in their hearts; and will be a God to them, and they shall be to him a people (8:10). That covenant shall be established at the second coming of Christ, when all Israel shall be saved (Rom. 11:26). But things were different under the old covenant. The phrase "I regarded them not" is also the translation of **ameleo**. It is a profound thought that God himself is capable of neglect. Where God is concerned, however, it is an expression of his justice rooted in holiness. It goes without saying that any man, woman, or nation for that matter, who has become the object of neglect by a Holy God is in a heap of spiritual trouble! Could God neglect America if secularism becomes mainstream?

In our last passage, we find Paul admonishing his protégé Timothy to "neglect not the gift" that was within him (1 Tim. 4:14). The verb **ameleo** is present imperative preceded by the negative particle **me**. The force could be either "stop neglecting the gift" or "allow no neglect of the gift." In either case, there is urgency for Timothy to be diligent with his giftedness. Because the command follows another imperative to "give attendance to reading, exhortation, and doctrine" (4:13), the gift was likely an expository and exegetical ability regarding the scriptures. The pervasive shallowness of preaching in the modern-day pulpit tells me that either God seldom bestows this gift or there is an epidemic of neglect running rampant among the men of God so gifted.

The Doctrine of Diligence

We called attention last week to several biblical passages that spoke to the issue of neglect. First of all, we found it was possible to neglect the King's invitation to salvation through his Son, and to incur perilous consequences for so doing. Secondly, the scriptures admonished us to avoid the neglect of our spiritual gifts. Although the text in 1 Timothy 4:14 was directed toward the young pastor of the church at Ephesus, it applies to the entire body of Christ inasmuch as all of its members are endowed with spiritual gifts. Thirdly, we discovered that God himself is capable of neglecting a covenant people who treat his covenants with willful disregard. The silver lining is that neglect on God's part where his people are concerned is never permanent. It is always a means to an end...that end being a people restored to fellowship with God and living in harmony with his covenants.

The biblical antithesis for negligence is diligence! The man, woman, or young person whose life is characterized by diligence in the things of God will seldom be found guilty of neglecting them. Now, there are certain aspects of the Christian life that require a defensive mindset, such as the "neglecting not" of our spiritual gifts. But God wants his people to live with an offensive mindset, and that's where diligence comes into play. The best defense is a great offense with regard to things spiritual. As in football, a measure of spiritual defense has its place. But victory is always determined by the team that puts up the most points on offense, whether six or sixty!

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines *diligence* (n.) as "the persistent application to one's occupation or studies...attentive care," and *diligent* (adj.) as "characterized by persevering, painstaking effort." The diligent believer is one who harbors a high esteem for the things of God, and perseveres in his or her efforts to achieve the spiritual goals set before them by the scriptures. The fundamental difference between the diligent man and his negligent counterpart is an abundance of care versus an absence of care—a matter of the heart!

In the 1611 Authorized Version, the word *diligence* (n.) occurs 10 times, *diligent* (adj.) 15 times, and *diligently* (adv.) 37 times. Any concept that the Bible calls attention to on 62 occasions is worthy of investigation. In this missive, however, we only have space for a select few.

The first mention of this concept is adverbial in form, and speaks volumes about the single most important entity to which we ought to apply ourselves with the utmost care—the word of God! After the Lord had sweetened the bitter waters of Marah in the wilderness of Shur, he delivered this admonition to his people Israel: "*If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight...I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that healeth thee*" (Ex. 15:26). The Hebrew root signifies the raking together of glowing embers with a poker to perpetuate the fire. So the Lord is saying: "Consider my words to be the spiritual embers that will set your soul aflame! Make it the habit of your life to give an abundance of care to those embers, and stoke

the coals of obedience!” In this first mention, our Lord established the unbreakable link between his Word and our health—spiritual and physical.

Of the twenty-six usages of *diligently* in the OT, thirteen (or half) reiterate the importance of an abundance of care regarding the scriptures. And in the last OT mention, we find these words: “And this [the building of the temple by the man whose name is The BRANCH] shall come to pass, if ye will *diligently* obey the voice of the Lord your God” (Zech. 6:15). The bottom line: Lack of diligence in the Word of God equals spiritual failure!

The single OT mention of *diligence* is a classic: “Keep thy heart with all *diligence*; for out of it are the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23). The English word here actually represents an expanded translation of the command—*Keep*. The sense is: “Set a diligent guard over your heart.” Has there ever been a more faithful sentinel than the Word of God when it comes to matters of the heart? Again, the Word of God vacated equates to a vulnerable heart.

The book of Proverbs offers a truckload of encouragement for the *diligent* of heart. “He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand: but the hand of the *diligent* maketh rich (10:4). The reference here is to a persistent application of one’s God-given talents (honest hard work) as opposed to the fraudulent “name it-claim it” or “health-and-wealth” gospels. “The hand of the *diligent* shall bear rule: but the slothful shall be under tribute” (12:24). The American tax system violates the scripture in that it lays the tax (tribute) burden on the diligent as a means of providing for the slothful. “Seest thou a man *diligent* in his business? He shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean [average] men” (22:29). Make no mistake! Hard work is an exercise in godliness, and is rewarded by the God that it honors! And God always rewards them that *diligently* seek him (Heb. 11:6).

In contrast to negligence, diligence is the WD40 of life. It keeps the fires of truth burning in the soul! It tackles and eliminates spiritual rust! It paves the way for both spiritual and material riches! It prepares the Christian pilgrim for the Judgment Seat of Christ, and this commendation: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant!”

The Silver Bowl

Now that the Bowl season is behind us (including the one they call “Super” and excepting the one they call “Pro”), perhaps it’s time to consider a bowl or two with *real* significance. Yes, the Bible has its own unique collection of bowls, most of which are rather amazing. Remember Gideon? After wringing the dew from the fleece of wool, he found the resultant “bowl full of water” to be a confirmation of God’s will to save Israel by his hand (Judges 6:38). The “golden bowl” of Solomon’s inspired imagery depicts the brain (mind) of the aging and the aged and as a reservoir of godly wisdom waiting to be broken by the rigors of time (Eccles. 12:6). They that are at ease in Zion “drink wine in bowls” as emblematic of their self-indulgence and spiritual stupor in the midst of Joseph’s affliction (Amos 6:6). By any reckoning, these bowls have *genuine* relevance to our lives.

Here’s a question for your consideration. What do these twelve Biblical characters—Nahshon, Nethaneel, Eliab, Elizur, Shelumiel, Eliasaph, Elishama, Gamaliel, Abidan, Ahiezer, Pagiel, and Ahira—have in common? The answer is found in Numbers 7—the bowl capital of the Bible! These men were princes over the twelve tribes of Israel, and brought offerings on behalf of their respective tribes to the tabernacle after Moses had anointed and sanctified it unto the Lord (7:1). Over a period of twelve days, one prince per day beginning with Nahshon of Judah, they brought their offerings to the Lord and his tabernacle. It’s a pity that a good many of us are more familiar with the Twelve Days of Christmas than we are the Twelve Days of Tabernacle!

All twelve offerings were identical, and the scripture is careful to give us detailed descriptions of the offerings (7:13-17). (1) One silver charger, an hundred and thirty shekels in weight. (2) One silver bowl of seventy shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary. Both the charger and the bowl were full of fine flour mingled with oil for a meat offering. (3) One spoon of ten shekels of gold, full of incense. (4) One young bullock, one ram, one lamb of the first year, for a burnt offering. (5) One kid of the goats for a sin offering. (6) For a sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five he goats, and five lambs of the first year.

A few observations are in order. First, the offerings (as we have already noted) were identical by design. There was no opportunity for one tribe to “out offer” another—no competition. After all, this special time of offering was all about the Lord God to whom the offerings came. Individual or tribal glory was out of the question. Still today at the foot of the cross there is but one object of boasting—the Christ who suffered and died for our sins! Secondly, these twelve offerings were presented one at a time over a period of twelve days to mark the interest God takes in the individuality of our giving. Every tribe received the same consideration—no favorites. Merrill Unger’s remarks are worth noting: “Although the gifts are identical for each tribe, they are recorded in detail, not primarily because repetition was characteristic of ancient oriental lists, but because the Lord takes special note of the gifts of His people, and giving in his sight is an individual matter” (*Bible Handbook*, p.124).

It would take an entire series of messages to “peel back the onion” so to speak regarding the significance of each item in the offering. Our interest is the silver bowl. Like all OT offerings, it tells us something of the Lord Jesus Christ. Silver represents his sinless humanity. Seventy speaks to me of Christ's sufficiency for sinners of all time from Eden until the end, having a prophetic connection with Daniel's seventy weeks. In the seventieth week, the Lord shall draw Israel to himself in a mighty display of salvation (Dan. 9:24-27; Rom. 11:26-27). The “after the shekel of the sanctuary” reference speaks to me of a standard of holiness rooted in the God of the sanctuary. Jesus was weighed accordingly, and found to be the embodiment of absolute moral and sinless perfection. The fine flour is the staff of life and the stuff of bread. Jesus is indeed the Bread of Life. Fine flour is obtained by a pulverization process, which speaks of the severe grinding Jesus endured on the cross. The mingled oil signifies both the virgin conception of Christ by the Spirit and his power to sustain Jesus through his Passion. The meat (meal) offering represents that which is freely given to the Lord in recognition of his sovereign ownership of all. The Lord Jesus offered himself freely to the Father as an offering on behalf of sinners because he loved them!

In the grand scheme of things, Super Bowls are a dime a dozen. You can live with them or without them. The outcome of these Super events has no bearing whatsoever on anyone's eternal destiny or spiritual health. But that Silver Bowl, and all that its content represents, you and I *must* have, or else we perish! The next Super Bowl experience is now one year away. But your next Silver Bowl experience could take place at the conclusion of this read, as you lay your head on the pillow tonight, or on your face in his presence before the next sunrise!

The Importance of Execution

Execution is what business analysts tell us separates profitable and growing companies from those that falter and fail. Execution is the ability to perform that which has been proposed. In other words, the successful enterprise is one that both plans its work and works its plan. Now, this is not news to most of us. If you've ever made a New Year's resolution, and failed to follow through during the ensuing twelve months, you understand the difference. Countless grand and glorious plans have collapsed upon themselves by the failure to execute!

Execution (or the lack thereof) is a rather prominent theme in scripture. We seldom think of it in those terms, but the biblical examples could fill the pages of a voluminous book. Perhaps you've already begun to identify some of those famous (or infamous) characters. Let's consider a few of them by issuing a series of statements about execution from a biblical perspective.

First, execution is of greater importance than elocution. Technically, elocution is the art of public speaking. In fact, your pastor is a professional elocutionist. In practicality, however, we are referring to articulation as the antithesis of action, and words as distinct from works. Jesus drew the distinction in this manner: "*And why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say*" (Lk. 6:46). Paraphrase: "Of what value is your elocution if you cannot back it up with execution?" The Lord Jesus is challenging us to consider the meaningless exercise of elocution (appellations to his Lordship) without execution (obedience).

Secondly, execution is oftentimes more important than supplication. Joshua found this out the hard way after Israel suffered an embarrassing defeat at the hands of the Amorites from Ai (Josh 7:1-26). As it turned out, the cause for defeat was the sin of Achan, who coveted a Babylonish garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold (7:21). These "accursed" things became the fly in Israel's ointment. The hearts of God's people melted with fear, thirty-six Israeli men died, and the battle was lost!

Joshua called the elders of Israel into an emergency prayer session (7:6). Who could fault him for that? When was the last time you heard of a pastor summoning his congregation into a prolonged prayer vigil because of an absence of God's glory and power in the church? Joshua offered some rather blunt supplication in the presence of God and the elders (7:7-9). He comes within a whisker of blaming God for the fiasco, considers that staying in Egypt might have been a better option, and questions whether God will be able to repair the damage done to his name. But God had heard enough, and proceeded to break up the prayer meeting (7:10).

The Lord made known to Joshua what should have been obvious: "*Israel hath sinned...therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies*" (7:11-12). The answer to Israel's problem was not in supplication, but rather in execution. At God's direction, Joshua conducted a search by tribe, by family, by household, and man-by-man until Achan was exposed...and executed. In this case, execution meant dealing with sin in the most serious and thorough manner. The sin of Achan caused his entire family to

perish. Moreover, public confession of his sin was insufficient to avert its fatal consequences. Does this not teach us that God is serious about sin?

Thirdly, execution may present the believer with a marvelous risk-reward opportunity. On the storm-tossed Sea of Galilee, the disciples were gripped with fear as they beheld Jesus walking on the water (Matt. 14:22-33). But Peter, daring to imagine what might be possible within the realm of the will of Christ, asked: "*Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.*" Jesus said, "*Come*" (14:28-29). So there it was—an invitation representing the perfect will of God awaiting execution by Peter the petitioner...and execute he did! With that first step, Peter moved into the realm of the supernatural, and was rewarded for his faith. Unfortunately, his was a little faith that entertained doubt when confronted by the boisterous wind...and he began to sink (14:30-31). It is amazing how soon the "bid me" of sanctified thought became the "save me" of self-centered doubt. Peter incurred no risk at all until Jesus ceased to be the center of his attention, and the word of Christ faded from his mind! So it is with us!

At the end of a foot washing session on the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus taught by example the supreme virtue of servanthood, and concluded with these words: "*If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them*" (Jn. 13:17). The first "if" is a Greek first class condition, where the condition is assumed to be true. The second "if" is a third class condition, where fulfillment is probable, but not certain. The sense is: "Since you know these things (that I have taught you about servanthood), happy are you if you do (execute) them." Their happiness (as ours is) would be contingent upon performing what Christ had proposed by both precept and example. As far as Jesus was concerned, execution, as a key to happiness, was more critical than education. And as noble as the pursuit of knowledge is, it is never enough just to know things. We must do the things we know. We must execute!

The Power of Parenthetical Thoughts

The apostle Paul was a master of parenthetical thought. In perusing his epistles, the student of scripture will find a collection of explanatory (and oftentimes apologetic) phrases sandwiched within broader contexts. One of the great challenges of biblical translation must certainly have been the grammatical construction of these ancillary phrases. With regard to Paul's use of parenthetical text, each instance could be likened unto a master surgeon making a precise incision, and implanting within the body a medicinal device with infection-fighting properties.

The epistle to the Galatians is a prime example. The three parenthetical phrases that Paul inserted as the apostle to the Gentiles are in themselves worthy of a volume. The first instance reads: "*not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead*" (1:1). Paul wastes no time in authenticating his apostolic authority. His apostleship was not *of* (Greek **apo**, from) men with respect to its origin. Nor was it *by* (Greek **dia**, through) men in terms of instrumentality, *but* (Greek **alla**, strong contrast) by the instrumentality of God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. His apostleship is backed by nothing less than resurrection power! I know of no greater comfort or assurance for the gospel preacher than the awareness that God himself is both the originator and facilitator of his call! And if resurrection power cannot enable him, what can?

The second instance reads: "*whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me: God accepteth no man's person*" (2:6). In the context, the word *they* refers back to those who were of reputation, with whom Paul had met privately in Jerusalem some fourteen years after his conversion (2:1-2). The phrase *maketh no matter* is the translation of **diaphero** (**dia**, through + **phero**, to carry). It signifies a difference. Paul gives meaning to the word when he states: "they...added nothing to me." In other words, they had no effect on him whatsoever—did not move him this way or that—regarding the gospel. Some might have mistaken Paul's self-assured disposition for a spirit of haughty independence. But he was simply a God-made man attesting to that fact. Still today, the man of God who knows full well who and what he is in Christ will sometimes make others a little uncomfortable.

The third instance reads: "*For he that wrought effectually in Peter to the apostleship of the circumcision, the same was mighty in me toward the Gentiles*" (2:8). Now here is the balance to his disclaimer in 2:6. Paul is acknowledging Peter as an apostolic peer. The same God that resided within Peter had likewise taken up his abode in Paul. The target audiences were different, but the gospel and the power to proclaim it were the same!

There is a unique use of verb tenses that is historically instructive. The phrases *wrought effectually* and *was mighty* are both from the Greek word **energeo** (Eng. energy, energize). Both are aorist (past) in tense as well as active in voice. The work of God to which Paul refers is a matter of historical (and public) record. Survey Jew and Gentile alike, and you will find thousands who will bear record of God's spiritual energy being unleashed through these two men. Moreover, the active voice stresses the fact that God

was at work without regard for the human instruments. Spiritual fruit is always the direct result of divine intervention in a yielded life!

But there is a subtle difference between the two. In referring to Peter, Paul uses a participle (literally, the one *having* worked effectually in Peter), but in referring to himself uses the simple past tense. The sense is: "the one *having worked* in Peter *worked* in me." By establishing the relationship in time past as opposed to the present (God was no doubt *still* working in both men), Paul was eliciting memories of Pentecostal empowerment that pre-dated his own experience of Spirit fullness. Paul was also affirming that what he had experienced prior to the writing of Galatians, which took place roughly 25 years after Pentecost, was on a par with Pentecostal power! I am reminded of a phrase used by my evangelist friend Bill Chapman: "What *has* been done, *can* be done." Paul was living proof of that truth! What God wrought in Peter, he later wrought in Paul! And in this hour, our Lord is looking those yielded vessels through whom he can work effectually!

The parenthetical thoughts inserted by Paul within the Galatian epistle provide fodder for encouraging our souls in our service for Christ. Our Lord is both the originator and facilitator of our call and accompanying gifts. He deals equally with all men who approach him on a faith footing. An ecclesiastical standing grants no spiritual advantage whatsoever in his presence. Moreover, we can be confident that the One who worked in Peter, and subsequently was mighty in Paul, is the same God who would work effectually in us! That is, what has been done, can be done! Will it be done in you and me? Oh, the power of parenthetical thoughts!

Update and the Religion of Cain

The recent lapse in getting *The Pastor's Pen* out on a weekly basis has been caused in part by my traveling out of town on alternate weekends. These bi-weekly trips disrupted my regular writing routine, which I intend to re-establish in short order. I want to say "Thanks" to so many of you that have expressed your appreciation for *The Pastor's Pen* over the last five years. It is our desire to continue the tradition.

As you are aware, we have often used current world and national events as a backdrop for expounding the truth of scripture. While we intend to continue this practice when appropriate, future weekly editions of *The Pastor's Pen* will likely come to you as part of a quarterly series dealing with Bible books, themes, etc. I believe that the introduction of a little structure to the current randomness will be a positive measure going forward.

The world community a few months back was caught up with the passing of Pope John Paul II. He was laid to rest on Friday, April 8, 2005 after a litany of pomp and ceremony. The religious world found itself in virtual unanimity regarding the greatness of this man. Even the secular world, for the most part, was willing to give him his due. But genuine believers were compelled to look at things from a biblical perspective. I'm afraid the Word of God is less kind to him than the myriad of his religious and worldly adorers.

Although it is yesterday's news at this point, please allow me to share a few of my truth-based reflections on the late Pope John Paul II. There are only two kinds of religion that have ever existed on the earth—the religion of Abel (who by faith brought a blood sacrifice to the altar as a sin substitute), and the religion of Cain (who by the work of his own hands offered a bloodless and God-insulting remedy). The former was accepted, the latter rejected! If one studies the tenets of Catholicism—for which the Pope is the arch-advocate—he or she will discover that they not only epitomize the religion of Cain, but also anathematize those who embrace the religion of Abel. Now, if Cain was "of that wicked one" (1 John 3:12), how can Catholicism—or its supreme head for that matter—be spared the same assessment?

The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is the consummation of the religion of Abel. At a God-ordained time in history, Jesus fulfilled that which Abel had prefigured. The good news God offers to every sinner is that Jesus, the Son of the Living God, died for his or her sins, and rose again the third day—the resurrection being a validation that (1) he was the Son of God with power, and (2) his death was for others. This gospel is therefore the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes it, whether Jew or Gentile (Rom. 1:16-17). In stark contrast, the false gospel of Catholicism offers safety to sinners within an ecclesiastical system based largely on tradition, rites, good works, and alleged vicarious grace via papal authority. This is the gospel Pope John Paul II took around the world—especially to Third World countries where spiritual darkness is at its worst.

Catholicism is not Christianity, nor can its head be considered a Christian. Why? Because of its gospel, which is not a gospel at all. The fact is the religious world, during the month of April 2005, was mourning the loss of a religious descendant of Cain, and

has elected a successor with the same anemic gospel. The real mourning that took place was among true believers, who are aware of the massive deception that the god of this world has perpetrated upon those who are lost and dying in their sins.

There is nothing quite so lethal to lost sinners as the appeal of a religion based on works rather than grace. The religion of Cain in all of its forms—including Catholicism—leads its adherence down the road the Hell. And but for the grace of God, we would all likewise perish!

No Time for Spiritual Vacations

The whole idea behind vacation is that we vacate the routines and grinds of life (usually those associated with our vocation) for more restful and family-oriented activities. Most right-thinking individuals see this as a healthy exercise, providing both physical and spiritual benefits for the practitioners. I certainly feel that way. There is, however, the temptation to become lax in our devotion to the Lord Jesus. This temptation presents itself to the child of God 365 days a year, seven days a week, and transcends the summer months. In terms of our walk with God, there is no time for a spiritual vacation.

In the 21st chapter of John's Gospel, we find the notorious words of Peter: "*I go a fishing*" (v.3). With him are six other disciples. In putting together post-resurrection events, it appears that Peter and these other men, in accordance with Jesus' instruction to meet them on a mountain in Galilee, were headed north to meet that objective. I am inclined to believe this meeting was planned at the same place the Transfiguration of Christ occurred. Perhaps the disciples were to receive another glimpse of glory for confirmation and encouragement.

On the way to the mountain, they passed by the sea of Tiberias, which for Peter had been the former venue for his livelihood and financial security. At this critical juncture, he opts to vacate (or at least postpone) his spiritual responsibility to Christ for a night of fishing. In fact, this decision on Peter's part may well have represented a return to his former occupational pursuit—picking up where he had left off some three years earlier.

Now, some may argue that this was no big deal, and that things turned out well in the end. I agree that things turned out well. But I would argue that this decision to vacate a specific spiritual assignment for an otherwise noble endeavor was in fact very costly to Peter and his Christian cohorts.

Surrounding this night of fishing are three distinct and vital issues that present themselves to us. The first is the matter of influence. The six men with Peter responded by affirming, "*We also go with thee*"(v.3). We have few valuables in this life more important than our influence. We rub shoulders every day with folks who hold us in high esteem, and may take our lead. They think that what's good for us is likewise okay for them. May God make us ever mindful of the enormity of influence upon those who follow our example. No spiritual vacation is worth the misleading of others!

The second is the matter ineffectiveness. The Bible says, "*They caught nothing*" (v.3). I would remind us that there was a wealth of maritime experience in that boat. But experience counts for little outside of the will and good pleasure of God. What Jesus performed here was not a miracle. It was Divine providence. The fish were there, but kept from the net until it was the Lord's will to fill it. Brethren, our best intentions and talents will always prove ineffective when we vacate the clear directives of the Lord Jesus in the pursuit of personal goals.

The third is the issue of insensitivity. Jesus was standing on the shore, but "*the disciples knew not that it was the Lord*" (v.4). The voice they had heard echo across this very lake on numerous occasions went unrecognized. He asked, "*Children, have ye any meat?*"

(v.5), but they neither perceived him nor discerned his voice. It is not until "*the multitude of fishes*" (v.6) that John says to Peter, "*It is the Lord*" (v.7). Here is an important truth! When it takes works rather than words to arouse our spiritual sensitivities, our spiritual condition has suffered! One of the cancers in Christendom today is the importance placed upon sensational works at the expense of eternal words. When congregations are built by performers rather than preachers, we know that the church at large is in serious trouble! The entertainment mentality rampant today among evangelicals caters to this insensitivity. The church is in desperate need of expositors, not exhibitionists!

Brethren, in the spiritual realm, there is no time for a vacation. These men have documented that truth clearly! This night of fishing carried with it a spiritual price tag that no child of God should ever be willing to pay!

The Keeping of the Heart

The book of Proverbs could well be called the Inspired Handbook of Sanctified Wisdom. It is replete with standalone admonitions that encapsulate truth so succinct and powerful as to literally transform the lives of those who internalize and obey them. Such a command is found in Proverbs 4:23: "Keep thy heart with all diligence: for out of it are the issues of life." Those who heed this directive have a virtual guarantee of spiritual success in this life.

The heart is one of the most prominent themes in scripture, and rightly so, because it represents the very core of human existence. I can remember taking a tour of South Florida's Turkey Creek nuclear power plant back in 1971 as a new employee of Florida Power & Light. Housed in the very center of its infrastructure, and hidden from casual observation, was a radioactive core around which all else revolved. The steam-driven turbines that drove its massive generators, and every other critical system component, derived their significance from that core. Such is the heart of man. While most of us would more or less agree with this analogy, the concept has been so humanized that we often forget that God himself has a heart. In fact, we have a heart because God has one! We derive ours from his as a function of creation. He created us in his own image and likeness...as a reflection of himself.

In Genesis 6:5-6, we find the first two mentions of the heart in tandem ...and instructive mentions they are! Regarding the collective heart of man, we are told: "Every imagination of the thoughts of *his heart* was only evil continually" (v.5). The impact of man's great wickedness upon the LORD God is recorded as follows: "And it grieved him at *his heart*" (v.6). So the first glimpse that scripture gives us into the heart of God paints for us a picture of suffering (grieving) as a result of sin! Even the suffering of Job—as pungent as it is to our senses—is eclipsed by the pangs of grief that only the heart of a holy God could experience where the sin of his creatures was concerned.

There are four (4) distinct conclusions to be drawn from the admonition at hand. First, the heart is a personal matter. It is "thy" heart that must be kept. The personal preposition speaks of (1) ownership—our most valuable and priceless possession, (2) stewardship—since it is derived from God, we bear the responsibility of doing something with it that will promote godliness in this world, and (3) accountability—the logical and ultimate end of any stewardship. I believe it is safe to say that the individual hearts of men are the most neglected valuables on the planet.

Secondly, the heart must be guarded. The word "keep" (a command) elicits thoughts of an armed garrison of soldiers dispatched to secure prisoners or to provide safety for a high official. It suggests that that which is to be kept is extremely valuable. What could be more valuable than the very center of one's being? It also suggests that the heart is extremely vulnerable. The very need for that garrison implies the existence of an enemy that would like to capture or bring harm to the person or thing kept.

As a general rule, we can keep our hearts by monitoring our activities in two important areas. (1) Things we see. Visual images excite the mind and emotions both positively

and negatively. What we expose ourselves to visually has a dramatic effect on the heart. (2) Things we hear. Words are powerful! Language is one of God's great gifts to mankind. Pay careful attention to conversations and audio inputs. They can incline your mind, emotions, and will toward righteousness or unrighteousness. A steady diet of God's infallible word will serve to satisfy both of these guidelines!

Thirdly, keeping the heart demands serious effort. The phrase "with all diligence" (emphatic) suggests that our best efforts are required on a continual basis. The keeping of the heart is a lifetime pursuit. It is neither seasonal (off/on) nor generational (for the *younger* years as opposed to the *senior* years). The alternative to diligence is negligence. Neglect leads inevitably to indifference, and indifference to self-indulgence.

Fourthly, the heart serves as a single point of origin. The phrase "out of it" signifies a source or resource. Thus the heart is single the point of origin for every thought, action, and reaction that defines who and what we are. Does that not simplify things? After all, if a man, women, or young person can control (keep) his or her heart, every thing else will take its proper place within the life. The word "*issues*" in Hebrew signifies *exits* or *boundaries*...the goings out and comings in of our daily activity. The life issues of the kept heart will tend toward godliness and righteousness.

How would you rate the degree to which your heart is being kept these days? Which word best describes or approximates your guardianship of this most valuable possession—diligence or negligence? May the Lord grant us grace to place this admonition at the very top of our life's list of priorities.

The Goliath in Your Life

Journey far enough down the road of life and you will encounter obstacles or challenges that appear to be insurmountable—mountains that are just too steep to climb. Israel encountered one of those roadblocks while under the leadership of Saul, its defunct king (1 Samuel 17:1-54). The challenge was embodied in Goliath, a champion in the Philistine army (17:4). We all remember well how young David rose to the challenge and destroyed that God-defying heathen.

The apostle Paul told us that “whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (Romans 15:4). Our learning may not be the *sole* purpose of the OT scriptures, but it is certainly a *solemn* purpose! A reading and ingesting of the OT writings promotes patience (an abiding under the loads of life) and comfort (a lending of encouragement from a God who is close at hand). These two virtues in turn bring hope (a confident expectation) to the heart.

Since the episode involving Goliath was made part of the biblical record, we can therefore assume he represents or symbolizes an obstacle or challenge from which the people of God can learn and be encouraged. If there is a Goliath in you life, dear friend, there is much to be learned from this Philistine giant.

So, what does Goliath represent to you and me? First, it goes without saying that Goliath represents the mortal enemy who sets himself against all that is God-related. He is the opposition—formidable opposition! In fact, his very name means “one who treads down” other men. It is noteworthy that Goliath touched upon two distinct themes while addressing the armies of Israel—death and servitude (17:8-10). Goliath was asking for one man to fight him to the death. When he said, “Give me a man, that we may fight together” (17:10), he was saying in essence, “Send out Saul!” Saul turned out to be a no show. The proposed outcome of this one-on-one battle would be servitude (17:9). The death of one would result in the servitude of many. Goliath teaches us that Satan—our mortal enemy and that of the gospel—is perfectly willing to bring into servitude that which he does not (or cannot) ultimately destroy.

Secondly, he represents intimidation. The scriptures paint for us the picture of a colossus. At “six cubits and a span” he stood between nine and ten feet in height. The plethora of protective brass armor from head to foot created the illusion of invincibility. For offensive weaponry, his six-hundred-shekel iron spearhead was a sledgehammer on steroids, equating to roughly fifteen pounds! The reaction of Saul and all Israel to the words that proceeded from the giant’s mouth is recorded for us: “They were dismayed, and greatly afraid” (17:11). Total intimidation was indeed the order of the day.

But consider this question: Was intimidation in and of itself the real problem? I think not! At various points in our Christian walk, each of us has encountered some challenge or form of opposition that has caused feelings of intimidation at first blush. No, the real problem with Saul and his army was *prolonged* intimidation. We are told that Goliath issued his challenge twice a day (morning and evening) for forty days (17:11). Basic

math tells me this infidel issued eighty challenges over the course of a month and a half. And not once during this time is there the first mention of prayer or praise being directed toward the living God by the people of God. Intimidation can be our friend if it drives us to the throne of grace. It can, however, wreck our lives if all we do is prolong our focus on the magnitude of our problem.

Thirdly, Goliath represents revelation. God often designs tough situations to reveal something of his own power and glory through his servants. In the previous chapter, Samuel had anointed David to be the next king of Israel, so that "the Spirit of the Lord came upon David" and "departed from Saul" (16:13-14). God had now set the providential stage to reveal to all Israel the favor with which he had graced this young man, and to demonstrate for the ages to come what a man filled with faith and the Holy Ghost can accomplish against insurmountable odds! David was simply a man who understood the God-honoring cause at hand (17:29), and gave himself to it.

Is there a Goliath in your life? Has the enemy raised his ugly head to create fear and intimidation within you? If so, remember that the real danger is prolonged intimidation that can ultimately destroy our resolve to fight the good fight of faith. Consider also that the Author and Finisher of our faith may have set the stage to reveal his power and glory through you as you trust him and continue to walk in obedience. The Goliath in your life may well be the steppingstone to the next level of your experience with the living God.

The Doctrine of Restoration

Have you ever taken a leisurely drive through an old historic district? You know, those elm- and oak-lined streets of the inner city where money used to live, but for the most part have fallen into states of disrepair? If so, you probably noticed a restoration project or two in progress. In many urban areas, city councils have crafted significant tax incentives for buyers ambitious enough to restore these dated properties to their former glory.

Restoration is one of those feel-good words! It signifies a renewed state—a bringing back of lost luster to that which time and circumstances have tarnished. And when we find the word used in the scriptures, it takes on something akin to doctrinal status. Make no mistake! Restoration is a biblical concept worthy of our time and attention. There are few themes that gender hope to the degree this one does.

The first biblical mention of restoration came from the Lord himself as he spoke to Abimelech, king of Gerar, in a dream by night. God warned: “Now therefore restore this man [Abraham] his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine (Genesis 20:7). Abimelech complied (20:14). I’m not sure how much we can read into this event in terms of types, but from a practical standpoint Abraham was certainly an elated benefactor from this restoration. We can affirm from this episode that the Lord himself is a staunch proponent of marital fidelity and perpetuity, especially in this case where so much was on the line regarding the seed of Abraham and Messiah.

The spirit of restoration is an overt indication of repentance in those who yield themselves to the Lord Jesus. We see this most noticeably in Zacchaeus, a rich man who was chief among the publicans (tax collectors). He said to Jesus: “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken anything from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold” (Luke 19:8). Perceiving the genuineness of his confession, our Lord pronounced him a saved son of Abraham...the greatest of restorations (19:9-10).

Restoration is the longing of the backslidden saint whose life has been rife with sin. One can sense the urgency in David’s soul with this request: “Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation” (Psalm 51:12). Sin is the destroyer of joy in the believer’s life, and should therefore be considered a catastrophic event. The forfeiture of cleanliness before a holy God for the dirtiness of fleshly indulgence is a fool’s game. The wayward saint who comes to his or her spiritual senses will seek restoration of lost joy through tears of confession and repentance. Any believer who comes clean with God in this fashion, as did David, and has the joy of his or her salvation restored, will liken it to the new birth experience. While being born again is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, the restoration of lost joy has the potential to repeat itself countless times during a lifetime of servitude to Christ.

The restoration of corrupt judges was a prophetic promise that the Lord God made to a backslidden Israel—once a faithful city wherein righteousness lodged, but had become a

murderous harlot (Isaiah 1:21). He said: "And I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counselors as at the beginning; afterward thou shalt be called, The city of righteousness, the faithful city" (1:26). The remnant of the righteous in America today are beseeching the Lord to make it so in our nation. Any Supreme Court that sanctions the slaughter of innocent human life in the womb through the abortion process is a murderous court that makes murderers out of abortion practitioners. The current Court nominee John Roberts represents a threat to this culture of death. We can expect secularists to oppose him with every slimy tactic possible. Oh, how this nation needs a restoration of judges! If America ever experiences genuine revival, there will be a marked transformation within its judgements toward righteousness!

The Lord made another promise of restoration to a backslidden Israel through the prophet Joel, saying: "And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, my great army I sent among you" (Joel 2:25). All of these pests represented a chastening army from God's hand. The nation had lost a lot, but stood to regain it all through the pity of God for his people (2:18). By application, there is hope in this promise of restoration for the saint who for years has wandered in the wilderness of sin, and has seen his or her spiritual vitality eaten away and virtually destroyed. If this describes you or someone you love and care for in the Lord, does not the potential for total restoration generate hope in the soul? Does not the hope that God can restore you to what you once were ignite a little bit of fire in your soul?

The need for restoration—both personal and national—abounds on every hand. What is your particular need? A marriage? The joy of fellowship with the Lord Jesus? A life of fruitfulness that for too long has been dogged by powerlessness? Know this! God is in the restoration business, and stands ready to restore the former glory to both saints and nations that will hear his voice and respond!

The Message in Natural Disasters

On Saturday morning, October 22, 2005 a special Fox News Channel program, which centered around the approach of Hurricane Wilma toward Florida's southwestern coast, carried a broader segment entitled: "Natural Disasters Igniting Fears of the Apocalypse!" The question at issue was whether God was causing these catastrophes as a mechanism for pre-announcing the end of the age. It is not unusual for natural disasters to be referred to as Acts of God, but this program seemed to take the matter a little more seriously than most.

One guest—a religious expert called in to offer an opinion on the matter—was a young Catholic scholar, who cited several combinations of cataclysmic events over the last hundred years or so that could have just as easily suggested that the end was near. The priest was simply calling attention to the obvious since time has marched on without interruption. It became obvious to me that this so-called scholar was attempting to disassociate God from any and all natural disasters where humankind is traumatized as a result. In the minds of many politically correct religious gurus, a God of love and a God of judgment are incompatible concepts!

Let's be clear about one thing! A holy God does not need to be defended if and when, for his own sovereign purposes, he uses the forces of nature to bring retribution upon his sinful creatures for their rebellion against his authority! The classic example of this truth is the universal Flood, wherein "all the fountains of the great deep" and "the windows of heaven" collaborated for forty days and forty nights to exterminate all but eight sinners from the face of the earth (Gen. 6:11-12). The scriptures tell us that Noah "found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (6:8), and was the one person the Lord deemed "righteous before him in his generation" (7:1). That tells me the other seven—including his wife—rode his coattails to safety.

Remember Pharaoh of Egypt? Here's another example of the natural forces of wind and water collaborating to provide a miraculous way of escape for God's people through the Red Sea while denying that same egress to Pharaoh and his merciless armies. The forces of nature that provided a means of deliverance for the former became the instruments of death for the latter...carrying out the will of God in the process!

Now, as far as natural disasters in the current hour being indicators of the end of time, I have no conjecture to offer other than to say that they may well be exactly that. But I believe there is a more pertinent issue to be considered apart from end-of-time concerns. And that is what natural disasters tell us about...well...us! In a word, they are testimonies against us as sinners. If sin had not entered into the world through the sin of Adam, and been perpetuated by his descendants, there would never have been the first natural disaster. Those idolaters who worship at the environmental altar attribute the recent onslaught of hurricanes to Global Warming. The truth is they are directly attributable to Global Sinning!

The inspired writer of Romans gave us a glimpse into this reality with the following words: "For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the

sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now" (Rom. 8:19-22).

Sin brought a curse upon the entire creation through no fault of its own. The creation currently groans and travails under a bondage it incurred through sinful man. The day is coming when God will transform and deliver his children from the bondage of their sinful flesh. The creation is confident that that day will signify its own deliverance as well...and it longs for that day!

So, the groaning and travailing will continue until then. That's how the believer should interpret these natural disasters—not as indicators of the end of time, but rather the sinfulness of the times. Every earthquake, tsunami, volcanic eruption, Atlantic hurricane, or Pacific typhoon that ravages a human population conveys a message of groaning and travail to the spiritual ear that the creation has had its fill of sin. The fact that the creation senses what the world at large cannot is yet further testimony to the obtuse condition of mankind's collective heart.

In closing, consider the role of the creation in the events surrounding the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. The sun was darkened for three hours, the earth quaked, and the rocks rent (Matt. 27:45,51). Even these objects, which we consider to be inanimate, were able to recognize and respond to the greatest of redemptive acts when they saw it! What does that say about the tens of millions who see the death of Jesus of Nazareth as nothing more than that of a good man who fell on bad times? Well, according to scripture, they're dumber than rocks!

Common or Conspicuous?

I received an e-mail message recently from a young man who has known the Lord for four years, and still nurtures an unquenchable thirst for God and an insatiable hunger for His Word. But he has a problem—a problem that unfortunately is shared by many of the faithful across this nation and around the world. His problem simply stated is this: the inability to find a local church aflame with Spirit power and augmented by exegetical precision...which I prefer to call expository fire!

Because he knows the truth, he understands that the will of God includes participation in a local church where he can glorify the living God through the exercise of his spiritual gifts. But alas his search for an Acts-like congregation is faltering due to heart-felt frustration!

I have one word for this young man: Welcome to the club! While the idea of becoming an integral part of a local assembly has never been abandoned, it is nonetheless difficult to muster enthusiasm for any ministry where the pulpit emits the aroma of ecclesiastical routine, and the pew appears to prefer the spirit of entertainment to the Spirit of the Living God!

The answer to this dilemma—in my humble opinion—is two-fold. First, we must come to grips with two attributes of the early church that are by-and-large missing from those of the current age. Secondly, we must adopt an attitude that can transform the propensity for criticism into construction action.

What are those two attributes? At the risk of oversimplification, they are supplication and sanctification. In other words, members of the early church were just average folks like you and me that had given themselves to prayer and holiness of life. In one of the classic New Testament passages confirming this truth, we read these words: “And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together, and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31).

The assembly of praying saints transformed a common place into a conspicuous place! The shaking was God's stamp of approval on their supplication. The Lord Jesus was rejoicing in spirit once again with his servants (Luke 10:21). If the church you attend tends toward commonality rather than a sense of the supernatural, there is but one explanation—prayerlessness!

A church characterized by prayer and purity is almost always that way because of its leadership. Again, we find the apostolic mindset to be thus: “But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). Pastor, you have no greater mandate than what is expressed in that verse! Unfortunately, if a prospective pastor should happen to share that conviction with members of a modern-day pulpit committee, they might very well assume that he is an isolationist bookworm who will use that as an excuse to shirk his role as chief administrator of every convention-sponsored program. To be sure, pastors have administrative tasks to perform. But the pastor who is

not first and foremost a man of prayer and the Word will by default forfeit the supernatural in his ministry!

Holiness of life is an inevitable extension of the prayer closet. Those who habitually linger in the presence of God will find themselves becoming more God-like in their demeanor with the passing of time. This is the process of sanctification (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Again, prayer and the purity it breeds beget conspicuous men, women, and youth. And if enough of these kinds of folk manage to migrate to the same congregation, that church is likely to be graced by the supernatural.

So, let's assume for the sake of argument that you're also a member of the aforementioned club. What kind of attitude should we have in dealing with our frustration? Well, the answer is this: a solemn determination to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

The Lord Jesus is our example. In a loving rebuke to the church at Laodicea (during which he admitted to having a case of nausea caused by their lukewarmness), he extended an invitation for intimate communion to "any man" that would "hear" his voice and "open the door" (Rev. 3:19-20). If the Lord Jesus, who is the Head of his church, was looking for an opportunity to get His foot in the door, how can we do less?

If you happen to be in a lukewarm church where routine is the norm and the supernatural is nothing more than a concept, determine that you will be one—even if the only one—with an openness of ear and heart toward the Lord Jesus. None of us can make a tangible difference in Kingdom terms if we are on the outside looking in. May our Lord use each and every one of us to transform the common into the conspicuous!

Connecting the Gospel Dots

The student of Paul's inspired writings cannot help but notice the logical manner in which he presents gospel truth, so that certain conclusions may be drawn from his linguistic constructions that are inevitable, unavoidable, and indisputable. At the top of the list is the gospel itself.

I am somewhat bewildered by the efforts of some within the Southern Baptist Convention to find common gospel ground upon which both Calvinists and Biblicists can stand. The problem with these efforts is that the gospel ends up being redefined as, and reduced to, the offer of salvation ("believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved") rather than its basis ("Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures").

The most prominent transgressor in this regard is Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY under the direction of President Albert Mohler. Southern Seminary runs its ads in many SBC state publications as teaching the authentic gospel. But this is false advertising. The authentic NT gospel has always consisted of the cross (i.e., the good news that God in Christ did something to atone for our sins) as the basis for believing in the Lord Jesus. It is therefore a virtual impossibility for any Calvinist to preach the authentic gospel.

What was the gospel that Paul preached? If we are able to define it according to scripture, should it not be the one gospel that is consistently held to and preached? Let's connect the gospel dots.

The book of 1 Corinthians is a good place to begin. In Chapter 1, Paul provides an absolutely convincing set of dots. In 1:17, he affirms that to preach the gospel is to preach the cross of Christ. In 1:18, he states that the preaching of the cross is the power of God. If we compare this statement of Paul with his letter to the Romans, where he declares that the gospel, of which he is not ashamed, is "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" (Romans 1:16), we may conclude that the central theme of gospel preaching is the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul follows up these affirmations by recounting "Christ crucified" as both the core of his gospel preaching and its power (1:23-24). And again in 2:2, he affirms that "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" was the central theme of his preaching to lost Corinthians from which he refused to be deterred. Now, if Paul subscribed to and taught limited atonement as Calvinism would have us to believe, just what was it about the cross that he preached? No amount of contorted reasoning from the Calvinist can gainsay the fact that Paul preached the cross as the all-inclusive atonement for the sins of man both God-ward and man-ward. To argue otherwise is to misrepresent the apostle Paul's own testimony, and to exhibit intellectual dishonesty in the handling of gospel truth.

When Paul gets to Chapter 15, he recounts the gospel he preached to the Corinthians while they were yet in their sins. His method is meticulous. He states: "I declare unto you [*in this epistle*] the gospel which I preached unto you [*before you believed*]" (15:1, brackets / italics mine). It is the gospel you received and by which you are saved, unless you believed in vain (15:1-2). That gospel [good news] is that "Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures" (15:3). He was subsequently buried, raised from the dead on

the third day, and seen by many, including me (15:4-8). Could Paul have been clearer about the all-inclusive nature and scope of the atonement? Did he not connect the gospel dots in such a way as to eliminate any and every other gospel pretender?

The gospel of the apostle Paul (and that of the Biblicist) is not the gospel of Calvinism. It's not because the Calvinist is a heretic. It's simply that the philosophical speculations of Calvinism, which include a false theory of limited atonement, hamstring the Calvinist with half a gospel. He or she is able to declare with conviction that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ will bring salvation to the believer, but lacks the ability to preach the cross of Christ as the all-inclusive good-news basis upon which God in Christ is able to save to the uttermost all that come to God by Him.

If you are one that has been hoodwinked by the speculations of Calvinism, it is our prayer that this simple exercise of connecting the gospel dots will serve to liberate you from Calvinism's half-gospel trap. If Christ did not die for all, what assurance can any individual have that the Lord Jesus died in his or her place? Is not the Lord Jesus incapable of saving any sinner for whom he did not die? Is not the preaching of the gospel to every creature, as Jesus commanded, impossible without an all-inclusive atonement for sin?

A Shelf Life for Our Troubles

We've all done it...or something akin to it! Passing through the produce aisles of the local grocery store, we notice a sale on the most beautiful strawberries—two packages for some ridiculously low price. In knee-jerk fashion, we promptly load them in our cart, and place them in the refrigerator at home. By the time the first package is eaten, we discover that the strawberries in that second package are starting to rot...requiring us to pare away the bad spots in an effort to salvage what is still edible. Like all perishable items, strawberries have a shelf life. The shelf-life clock begins to tick the moment they are picked in the field. If they are not consumed within an abbreviated window of time, they cease to be consumable.

In virtually every situation where a shelf life is in play, it tends to work against us. But in the crucible of real life beyond strawberry trivia, there is a certain shelf life that tends to work in our favor! I am referring to the trials and troubles that we incur in the course of our lives.

Now, you may not be in the midst of trouble at this hour, but you have no doubt experienced trouble in your past and unavoidable trouble awaits you in your future. As you reflect upon the past and anticipate your future, be mindful of this truth: troubles have a shelf life! That is, they are seldom if ever permanent in nature. Like a squall that pops up over open water and tosses the small craft to and fro for a season, it will eventually blow itself out, and return the sea to its former calm. Let us cite a few examples.

The scriptures tell us that the Spirit of God drove Jesus into the wilderness immediately after his baptism (Mark 1:12). The next forty days brought three sinister temptations fomented by Satan and accompanied by a severe case of hunger. In the strength of the Spirit, Jesus weathered those forty days of trouble with sinless perfection still in tact, and afterward enjoyed the succor of angels for His trouble (Matthew 4:11). The wilderness temptations were no picnic, but they had a shelf life. They also provided a showcase for the Messianic character that would offer a propitiatory sacrifice for our sins some three years down the road. Moreover, they demonstrate that troubles incurred by the righteous can be enemy-related without being sin-related.

Paul and Silas were incarcerated in Philippi and beaten for preaching the gospel (Acts 16:19-34). By any measure, doing time in a Roman-run jail constituted trouble of the first order. But it was jail time with a shelf life. The Lord intervened during a midnight praise session, set the prisoners free, and saved a Roman jailor...and his household. How many times in scripture do we find a sovereign God taking that which was intended for evil and transforming it into good?

The prophet Elijah ran into a bit of trouble at the hands of wicked Jezebel (1 Kings 19:1-18). Some might argue that in his case it was more a matter of perceived potential trouble than an actual crisis. But when you're on the run from the threatenings of a devilish queen with ultimate political power, perceptions can weigh heavy on the mind. The cave-dwelling Elijah was deep in depression and ready to write his own obituary

when a still small voice brought him out of his spiritual funk to anoint two kings and his prophetic successor, and later take a chariot ride into glory! Elijah teaches us that even the depths of despondency have a shelf life when one is attentive to God's voice and follows through with obedience to it!

What about self-inflicted trouble? All of us have been guilty at one time or another of shooting ourselves in the spiritual and or moral foot. Let's consult with David on this one (2 Samuel 11-12). Having lusted after and committed adultery with a rank-and-file soldier's wife, he plotted the murder of that honorable man, and sought to cover it up for the better part of a year. He was finally confronted and exposed by the prophet Nathan, resulting in the death of an illegitimate yet innocent child. David was broken (read Psalm 51 to get a sense of that brokenness). But his trouble had a shelf life. In a display of mercy virtually unparalleled in scripture, David and Bathsheba give birth to another son—Solomon—who became the next king of Israel and whose God-given wisdom was reputed to be incomparable. In addition to those accolades, it is said, "and the Lord loved him" (12:24). Excuse me while I shout!

We could cite many other examples, and probably a few exceptions. But you and I must remember that when we encounter troubles along life's way, whether self-inflicted or from external sources, they almost certainly have a shelf life that will run its course to accomplish God's purpose in your life and in mine. And God's people said, "Amen!"

Thank You, Michael Vick!

As the media obsession with NFL superstar Michael Vick continues, I'd like to take the opportunity to say "Thanks!" to the Atlanta Falcons franchise quarterback for exposing the flagrant hypocrisy of those in our nation who support a woman's right to an abortion on demand. Vick has been indicted on several counts with regard to illegal dog-fighting activities, including everything from wagering (up to \$25,000 on some fights) to the brutal execution (electrocution, drowning, etc.) of those dogs that under-performed in the arena. Yet misguided women and their accomplices who opt to execute their unborn children remain legally protected from indictment due to the Roe vs. Wade Supreme Court decision of January 22, 1973.

What is the argument offered by the right-to-choose crowd? In a word, it is *privacy*. If you have ever observed liberals on the Senate Judiciary Committee grilling Supreme Court nominees, you know that the number one litmus test is whether the nominee believes the Constitution provides for a right to privacy. Liberals and secularists worship at the altar of abortion. To them it is sacrosanct! They argue there is nothing more private than a woman's body—including a fetus—and what she chooses to do with it.

Now, let's suppose for a moment that Michael Vick decided to use the right-to-privacy argument in his defense. After all, those dogs were indeed his personal and private property. Why should he not have the ability to do with his private property on his private property what he chooses? Why should not Michael Vick be given a pass for a few pit bulls when, for the last 34 years, the highest court in our land has given women a pass on the destruction of a human life?

The hypocrisy in this issue was perfectly illustrated by Robert Byrd when he stood before the Senate and declared Vick's alleged acts to be "Barbaric! Barbaric!", and did so with an animated fervor seldom seen in Spirit-filled preachers! I'm not saying that Byrd is wrong in his assessment. What I am affirming is that failure to apply the same standard to unborn children is moral blindness and hypocrisy of the first order!

The Republican and Democrat presidential debates for the 2008 race are well underway. In conspicuous fashion, moderators of these events typically ask Republican candidates to answer some sort of question about abortion in an effort to portray them as anti-privacy candidates. Democrats are seldom if ever asked an abortion question simply because it is a well-known fact that the sine qua non of Democrat leadership is an unqualified commitment to abortion.

This is one reason why Rudy Giuliani is so frustrating to evangelicals. While we admire him for a strong position on national security, we find it rather disconcerting that he more or less aligns himself with the Democrats on the matter of abortion, citing privacy and legal precedent.

The main problem with the abortion debate in this nation is the lack of an articulate candidate who truly believes that life begins at conception. The conservative man or woman who could make this case in a persuasive and unapologetic manner to a national

audience could conceivably change the course of American history. May our gracious Lord bring such a candidate to the forefront of our national affairs!

Now, there is enough libertarian in me to understand and appreciate the privacy argument. But in no way should right-thinking men and women extend the argument for privacy to include the sacred and innocent human life that makes its abode in the womb of its mother by no choice of its own. It is high time—yea, past time—that we grant to precious unborn human life the same legal protections so readily afforded to bulldogs. Our thanks to Michael Vick for unwittingly exposing the hypocrisy that prevents this from happening.

Lessons from Philemon

The book of Philemon is a personal letter written by the apostle Paul to Philemon, a dear brother in Christ. The occasion of writing was the salvation and subsequent return to Philemon of Onesimus—a runaway slave—coupled with a reasoned plea from the apostle for Philemon to receive Onesimus with a full knowledge of what had transpired in his life. There are several salient points for our observation, which constitute lessons for all believers.

First is the matter of providence in God's economy (v.15-16). Paul reminds Philemon that the hand of God in the orchestration of human events could very well be responsible for the former slave Onesimus both hearing and believing the life-changing gospel, transforming the servant into a beloved brother. At first blush, it may appear that Philemon made little or no effort to win Onesimus to Christ. However, it may be that Philemon did indeed seek to win Onesimus to faith in Christ, which perhaps instigated his departure. If that was the case (and I lean toward that scenario more than the former), then we find that Onesimus, having fled the gospel influence of his benevolent owner, found himself running head long into the same gospel claims in a jail cell he shared with the apostle.

When the grace of God sets its affection upon a sinner, there is no place to hide. While God's grace as demonstrated in his providential dealings with man often escapes detection in our present, it almost always manifests itself in life's rear-view mirror as we move into our future. Paul's appeal to Philemon is to look into that mirror and embrace the fruits of providence!

Second is the reciprocal and effectual nature of prayer. Philemon was a recurring theme in Paul's prayer life (v.4). The well-traveled and over-tasked apostle was never too busy to pray regularly for his friends. Paul expressed confidence that he likewise was a focal point in Philemon's prayer life (v. 22). Paul was convinced that the prayers of Philemon on his behalf would turn desire into reality! Is there any spiritual brother or sister of your acquaintance toward whom you have the same degree of confidence? Effectual prayer on the part of its members is to the church what oxygen is to the human body!

Third is the proper use of spiritual authority. While his authority as an apostle would have given him the right to "enjoin" (make a demand upon) Philemon to receive the returning slave, Paul opts to "beseech" him for love's sake. The word "convenient" (v.8) suggests that receiving the now-converted Onesimus with loving open arms is the right thing to do. But Paul refuses to abuse his authority in Christ, but rather appeals gently to Philemon on equal footing as a fellow brother. Those in spiritual authority (especially pastors) would do well to follow this model when seeking to motivate others regarding a right course of spiritual conduct. The desired result of our appeals to brethren in Christ is that they perform the will of God "willingly" as opposed to a sense of "necessity" (v.14).

Fourth is the power and intensely personal nature of the Gospel of Christ. In addition to making "sons of God" out of those who believe it (JN 1:12-13), the gospel begets spiritual sons out of the "bowels" of those who deliver it (v.10). Paul to Philemon: "He

who is a physical servant to you has become a spiritual son to me.” How would this concept, if embraced, change our view of the ongoing spiritual nurture (as found in tender-hearted loving parents) of those that we lead to Christ?

In addition, a life changed by the gospel becomes a source of “refreshing” to those with whom it comes in contact (v.7, 20). Philemon was a source of spiritual refreshment to his fellow saints as well as to the apostle himself. Paul linked the refreshment of his soul to the anticipated obedience of Philemon to his request. There is nothing more refreshing to the heart of a pastor or teacher than the internalization of and obedience to the word of God by those who sit under their tutelage.

Moreover, the gospel can transform the “unprofitable” man or woman into one that is “profitable” for both spiritual and worldly enterprises (v.11). As applied to Onesimus, I believe the word “unprofitable” signified not only the spiritual dearth of his soul but also his virtual uselessness as servant. A workaholic Onesimus was not. But now though the gospel Onesimus had found both a spiritual thirst and a work ethic (v.16). The gospel had rendered Onesimus fit to serve the apostle in its bonds. Paul to Philemon: “If you refuse to receive this brother back into your graces, be assured that I will be the benefactor—both spiritually and physically—and you, my friend, will be the loser!”

The fifth takes the form of a subtle caution. The mention of Demas (v.24), who subsequently forsook Paul and the ministry due to a love for this present world (2 Tim. 4:10), is a sober reminder that the fellow-laborer of today can become the deserter of tomorrow without daily maintenance of the heart with regard to things both spiritual and carnal. A compromised and deteriorating love for Christ over a prolonged period of time can result in devastating consequences if that trend is not reversed.

What the book of Philemon lacks in length it more than makes up for in the practical lessons it provides for our spiritual welfare as we interact with fellow believers. The student of scripture would be wise to ingest and implement these important lessons.

Why the Husband of One Wife?

The evangelical community and the biblical truth upon which it stands remain under assault from the political correctness of our age. One of the prominent issues with which the church is struggling is the matter of pastoral leadership. In recent years, some denominations have swung the door wide open for women to serve as part of a pastoral staff and in some cases as senior pastor. And then there is the perennial argument about whether or not the church should consider a divorced man as a pastoral candidate.

In at least two places, the scriptures make clear that the bishop (pastor) is to be "*the husband of one wife*" (I Timothy 3, Titus 1). While it is generally accepted that the phrase has the sense "one-woman-kind-of-man", as it pertains to character, similar usage as applied to widows would indicate one woman and only one for a lifetime. Consider Paul's instruction in I Timothy 5. The widow indeed—one who has no living kin or familial means of support—must have been "the wife of one husband" without regard for a death or divorce in her past.

Paul's point in context: A widow prone to remarriage is compromised in terms of her ability to be a full-time, non-distracted prayer warrior for the church. If we therefore grant the sense "one-man-kind-of-woman" for the prospective "widow indeed" as it is granted for the bishop and deacon, then far more than mere character is in view. It is clearly meant by Paul to mean one husband and only one for a lifetime. Is there any reason to believe Paul had anything less in view for the offices of bishop and deacon, making them bishops indeed and deacons indeed? Why should the church settle for less?

There are four good reasons why the pastor of a local church should be the husband of one wife—one whose past has not been blemished by a divorce and remarriage. First, the husband of one wife alone is able to reflect the unfailing love of Christ for his church. The Lord Jesus saves believers to the uttermost, promising never to leave them nor forsake them under any condition. The pastor must be a reflection (albeit flawed) of the Lord Jesus as the overseer of his church. A divorced man, without regard for who was at fault in the breakup, has forfeited the ability to replicate or simulate that image of Christ.

Secondly, the divorced pastor is guilty of breaking the most sacred contract on the planet. Before sin ever reared its ugly head within Adam's race, the first man received instructions regarding the "leaving and cleaving" that would constitute and characterize the marriage contract. The "till death do us part" vow is a binding contract entered into by the groom and his bride before both God and men. No man who has been party to the dissolution of this sacred contract is qualified to teach others in matters pertaining to marital faithfulness and life in general.

Thirdly, the divorced pastor is guilty of fomenting the sin of fornication if his first wife remarries. And if his current wife has similarly gone through a divorce, he has committed fornication with her in consummating a physical union. Now, there is room to argue whether remarriage constitutes an act of adultery or an ongoing state of adultery, but it is

clear from the Lord Jesus that at least one act of fornication is committed when a divorced man enters into another marriage.

Lastly, divorce and subsequent remarriage calls into question the ability of the man of God to walk with God at the highest level. This corresponds to the aforementioned instruction for widows indeed. It is challenging enough for the man of God to maintain a high level of intimacy with God while sharing his life with a wife (see I Corinthians 5). But the divorcement from one woman followed by the marriage of another (notwithstanding the proper gifts of God for marriage) indicates that God alone is insufficient to provide fullness of life for that man. This exactly Paul's point about the widow indeed!

Some would argue that grace is the great equalizer that can cleanse a sordid past and fit a saved sinner for any and all manner of service in the kingdom. The problem with this logic is that divorce, while subject to remedy through reconciliation and recommitment to the original vows, cannot be forgiven (i.e., erased). Consider the ten year-old boy who suffers the loss of a finger while playing with firecrackers. The parents of that nine-fingered boy can certainly forgive him for his foolish and debilitating conduct, but there is no forgiveness available for the amputation of his finger—now a permanent liability in his future. So it is with divorce. A man or woman can certainly be forgiven by God and their fellow man for the foolish and selfish attitudes that dissolved the most sacred of contracts. But the putting asunder of a marriage—the most horrific of amputations—is a blemish that divorced men and women will carry to their graves.

Now, it must be said that there are God-called divorced men who are still out there serving in pastoral ministry. These men, however, have not remarried, but rather have purposed in their hearts to obey the scripture, remaining unmarried pending a reconciliation with or the death of their former spouse. In such cases where a one-woman-kind-of-man character remains in tact, gracious congregations continue to benefit from their pastor's faithfulness to both live and preach the Word of God.

In closing, the following question is in order: Can the divorced man or woman be Spirit-filled and useful in kingdom work? Absolutely! But the offices of pastor and deacon are two for which a divorced man is disqualified for the reasons cited. I am reminded of an admonition that a pastor friend of mine issues to engaged couples who attend his premarital counseling sessions: "God has given you one shot at marriage...so make it a good one!"