

RELEASING THE GOSPEL

**Breaking The Gospel
Out Of Religious Boxes
In Order To Go Into All The World**



DICKSON

RELEASING THE GOSPEL

Roger E. Dickson

CONTENTS

Preface – 3

Introduction – 8

1 – *“The Gospel Box”* – 22

2 – *The Incarnate Word Of God* – 28

3 – *Revelation Of The Word Of God* – 34

4 – *Bursting Out Of Boxes* – 40

5 – *Following A Gospel Example* – 48

6 – *Gospel Seminar In Rome* – 53

7 – *Moving The Gospel Beyond Professionalism* – 56

8 – *Moving The Gospel Beyond Legal Restoration* – 59

9 – *Moving The Gospel Beyond Degrees* – 62

10 – *Moving The Gospel Beyond Corporate Education* – 66

Biblical Research Library – 70

Abbreviations – 71

rdickson@mweb.co.za

www.africainternational.org

www.blog.africainternational.org

Facebook: Africa International.org

Philadelphia, Western Cape, South Africa

Copyright 2020, Africa International Missions

Scripture quotations from *International King James Version*

Preface

The subject of this study can be easily misunderstood, especially by those who have drifted away to religion from the nature of the gospel. For this reason we must be very clear on what we are trying to say, for we all have a little religion in us. We must be definitive in our comments because those who have more religion than gospel find it quite difficult to understand the true nature of the gospel. When confronted with the truth of the gospel, the religion in us often makes us become very defensive in reference to the beliefs and behavior of our particular religious group. Just ask the Jews during the ministry of Jesus.

If there are areas where we are not clear on what we are trying to say, please be patient with us until you have finished the final chapter. But because the evangelistic outreach of the church seems to be waning, we have deemed it necessary that something be said as a caution to where we are in reference to the true nature of the gospel, which nature seems to a great extent to be fading away.

For those of the West who would be zealous to preach their understanding and application of the gospel, we would also write a note of caution. The nature of the gospel to a great extent has been Westernized. We say this because of the impact that the gospel had on the lives of the early disciples when compared to its impact today on the typical Western citizen. When we compare the behavior of the Western disciple today with the disciples of the first century, there seems to be a stark difference. The reason for this is more in reference to culture than belief. Nevertheless, the New Testament paints a somewhat different picture of the first century Christian as compared to the typical Christian today who resides in a very materialistic society.

Contrary to the culture of the early disciples, ownership of possessions and the right to prosperity are strong cultural values of the West. Therefore, we would certainly be naive if we did not recognize that these cultural values have not influenced the response of the typical Western disciple to the gospel. In other words, we often believe the gospel, but we will not allow the truth of the gospel to infringe on our right to possess and prosper in abundance.

What we have discovered is that some who champion the gospel are doing so only by preaching the historical events of the gospel, not so much the impact the gospel has on the individual who seeks to live by the gospel. Life-changing gospel motivation into incarnational living is another subject that is often ignored. If you question this assessment, then ask yourself when was the last time you heard a sermon on the incarnation of the Son of God and our response to have this mind of Christ and behavior in our own lives (See Ph 2:5-8)? One might even take a moment to read in Philippians 3:7,8 in order to see the impact that the truth of the gospel had on the life of Paul.

What inspired the writing of this book has been something that seems to always plague the disciples in reaching out with the gospel to those of the world, regardless of what society in which they live. This is especially true in reaching out to those who have a common faith in Jesus Christ, but are somewhat disoriented in reference to connecting all the dots concerning the truth of the gospel. Many religious groups realize this. But unless we ourselves can connect all the gospel dots, we will continue to preach confusion. But if we can sort ourselves out on this matter, then there is a tremendous opportunity in the religious world to preach the gospel that frees the minds and hearts of the people from the bondage of religion.

A historical example is often good in order to remind ourselves from where we may have drifted. For example, we remember reading the biography of a gospel preacher who worked in the northwestern part of America in the early 1900s. We read with interest in his biography a very interesting practice that he and other gospel preachers followed in their efforts to preach the gospel to churches who were stuck in the religion of their forefathers. The author of the biography stated that it was the common practice of gospel preachers in those times to preach nightly meetings that would carry on for weeks. He explained that the reason for this was that the request to go to different churches to preach the gospel seemed to be unending. People wanted to hear more about the gospel.

So he explained what he and other gospel preachers would do in their meetings. They would go to a particular religious group and ask if they could come and preach the gospel to the entire group. Since there were few preachers in the northwestern part of America in the early 1900s, the leaders of the churches almost always asked them to begin a meeting in their church building immediately.

The meeting would subsequently proceed with nightly preaching on the subject of the gospel. After about two weeks of preaching the gospel, resulting in the baptism of several who were meeting with that particular group, they would move on to another church and continue preaching the gospel. Sometimes they were asked to move on because they were baptizing too many of the host church members. Nevertheless, they would go from one religious group to another until the requests to come and preach the gospel were exhausted, or rejected. The preaching would carry on nightly from six to eight weeks. The result was that scores of people would obey the gospel in baptism for the remission of their sins.

In our travels throughout almost five decades of preaching, we have experienced the same. We have recently found that it is more productive and far reaching to work with the pastors/preachers of different religious groups in studying the gospel together, and then inspiring them to preach the gospel anew to their own churches. God has opened an incredible door to thousands of pastors/preachers throughout the world who want to study the Bible in order

to better understand the gospel that is revealed in the Bible.

The common confession that the leaders have is that they believe in Jesus Christ, but they have come to understand that they still need studies in the gospel. This is particularly true of independent churches who have come out of the bondage of mainline traditional religion. But because many of these leaders have had no formal education, they are seeking someone to come and teach them more accurately the truth of the gospel.

This is certainly a wonderful opportunity in these days for preaching the gospel in reference to those things about which we agree concerning the gospel. It is simply an overwhelming open door that has been thrown open by sincere Bible-believing leaders who just want to know more about the gospel.

Regardless of how great the opportunity, however, a problem often develops in the circle of those who claim to know the gospel, but have often turned the gospel into “another gospel” that is patterned after their own heritage and theologies. There are those who have circled around and become that from which they fled in their own restoration movement. They have subsequently lost touch with the spirit of trying to work with others in reference to the fundamentals of the gospel about which we agree. Instead of focusing on the gospel that moves us closer together, we seem to have this obsession to focus more on our differences that move us further away from one another.

This is often the curse of restoration movements, especially those movements that were actually legal restorations of law. By legal restoration, we mean those who have sought to restore law by which they would judge others, and not the gospel of grace. Consequently, when they approach others with whom they disagree on interpreted law, they find it difficult to discuss Bible because they are more apt to debate law. And in communities throughout the world, those who have claimed to be a true restoration of the “truth” have made so many enemies that they are no longer invited for any discussions. This is certainly a sad situation that the debaters of law have developed in communities throughout the world.

One of the best examples to use to illustrate the preceding problem is the Lord’s Supper. Throughout the continent on which we now live there are a great number of preachers who think they are preaching the gospel when they are preaching the Lord’s Supper. They believe that the Lord’s Supper is a part of the gospel. Therefore, they believe that they must preach every aspect of the Lord’s Supper in order to be preaching the entire gospel. But they are mistaken.

The result of making the Lord’s Supper a part of the message of the gospel is actually a diversion from the gospel. It is actually creating a stumbling block for many of those groups who claim to be preaching the gospel. The proof of this is that those who preach the Lord’s Supper as the gospel have actually divided among themselves on this matter because of supposed violations of legalities surrounding the Supper. For example, they have di-

vided over the substance of the bread and fruit of the vine, the number of containers by which to serve the fruit of the vine, as well as the frequency and ceremonial performance of the Supper on Sunday. Some have even divided over the proper attire that should be worn when serving the Supper.

One would think that all this division would at least turn the light on to the fact that the Supper is not the gospel. When Jesus said, "*This do in remembrance of Me,*" He established the Supper as a law **in remembrance of the gospel**. The irony of the matter is that the observance of the Supper is to bring us together around the table, not divide us. But because of so much contention that often arises on the subject, the Supper has often become the occasion to drive people away from one another. This is not gospel behavior. Some have legalized certain ceremonial systems of the Supper to the extent that it has become an opportunity to reveal divisive attitudes that are contrary to the unity that the gospel should produce. This cannot be what Jesus had in mind when He instituted the Supper.

Because of division that is sometimes caused around the observance of the Supper, one would think that legal theologians would conclude that the Supper cannot be the gospel. Therefore, we believe that those who would divide over the Supper have as much difficulty in understanding the truth of the gospel as those who are trying to dig themselves out of the confusion of religion.

The sad result of all the clamor over rites, rituals and ceremonies, therefore, has not only divided those who claim to be the guardians of the gospel, it has also led supposed "gospel preachers" away from being invited to preach the gospel to other religious groups. Others have witnessed all the division that supposed "gospel preachers" have caused over various issues, and thus they have concluded that they do not want such debaters to come into their midst. They conclude that if such "gospel preachers" cannot determine the difference between the gospel and issues surrounding law, then they simply do not want such preachers to come among them and cause the same chaos.

Our inability to distinguish between gospel and law sometimes makes it difficult for others to understand the distinctiveness of the gospel. We ourselves have often confused the two, and as a result of our own confusion, thousands of doors have been closed to preaching the gospel. Some of our literature that we have sent throughout the world has often perpetuated the problem. Since there is little distinction made between the gospel and law in the literature, others cannot fully appreciate the simplicity of the gospel since it is often wrapped in the shroud of so many religious rites, rituals and ceremonies. Therefore, instead of preaching the unifying truth of the gospel to a world that is trying to come out of legally defined religion, some of our literature is actually teaching a legally defined "gospel" that one must obey in order to justify oneself before God.

We believe in a restoration of the gospel, not in a restoration of legalities

that set aside the gospel of grace and the freedom that one enjoys as a result of his or her obedience to the gospel. We believe in the total sanctification of the cross, not in our ability to sanctify ourselves by our own performance of either law or good works. This is the message that many in the religious world are yearning to hear.

INTRODUCTION

In order to preach the gospel, we must continually rehearse our knowledge of the nature of the gospel. We must do this lest we bring into the message of the gospel the religious inclinations of men, and thus turn the gospel into a religious system of justification through meritorious law-keeping. In the first century, this invasion into the church occurred. Subsequently, two Holy Spirit-inspired books were written to meet the challenge of those who confused the gospel with meritorious law-keeping.

Those to whom Paul wrote the letter of Romans were trying to turn the gospel of the grace of God into a legal system of self-justification through law-keeping. Those to whom he wrote the letter of Galatians were preaching gospel, but they were adding to the gospel the necessity of meritorious law-keeping. They were thus preaching “another gospel” (Gl 1:6-9). Therefore, in order to introduce any study on the subject of the gospel, we must be very clear as to what we understand to be the truth of the gospel. We must do this lest we become “other-gospel” preachers as opposed to gospel preachers.

A. The gospel is a good news message.

Since the Greek word from which the English word “gospel” is used to translate its meaning into English, means “good news,” then we must refresh ourselves as to what the good news is. We have found that too many people have been diverted from what the good news is. In other words, they have been diverted from gospel by confusing it with law. The law of God is certainly good (Rm 5:17). But the law of God is not good news for any person. In fact, it is bad news in reference to our justification before God. “*By works of law **no flesh will be justified***” (Gl 2:16). James referred to this when he wrote the following statement concerning law: “*For whoever will keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, **he has become guilty of all***” (Js 2:10).

One sin makes a sinner, and since sin exists only where there is

law, then law reveals death, not good news. Paul stated it as follows: *“For without law, I was once alive. But when the commandment came, sin revived and I died”* (Rm 7:9). Law brought spiritual death and separation from God. But gospel brings life, and because it brings life, it is good news. It is for this reason that gospel is not law. Notice this comparison in the following words of the Holy Spirit: *“For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ [gospel] has freed you from the law of sin and death”* (Rm 8:2). Glory hallelujah! And once delivered from the law of sin and death, *“do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage”* (Gl 5:1).

There is an obvious conclusion from the preceding that is necessary to make. Law can never be gospel, for gospel is good news. It is good news in the fact that one can be justified before God without perfect obedience to any system of law. Therefore, if one is preaching law as the gospel, then he does not understand the gospel. If he preaches the gospel as law, then he still does not understand that he is preaching the law of sin and death. He is preaching “another gospel” that is contrary to the gospel. (More on this later.)

If the preceding thoughts do not shock “other-gospel” preachers into some sense of gospel reality, then they have joined the crowd of those that Paul described as *“false brethren secretly brought in, who sneaked in to spy out our liberty that we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage”* (Gl 2:4).

It is absolutely critical to understand this point before continuing in our efforts to understand the truth of the gospel. If one cannot separate law from gospel, then he can never be an effective gospel preacher. If one preaches a “legalized gospel,” then he is “another-gospel preacher” (Gl 1:6-9). And sadly, this is the predicament in which many preachers find themselves today because they have either forgotten the gospel, or they never initially understood the truth of the gospel.

Sometimes it is as it was in our own case. We went off to a Bible school where we were overwhelmed with law. We eventually graduated, but we understood law more than gospel. We were simply taught that there was no difference between gospel and law. The gospel of freedom in Christ and law were so fused together that it took no little

time to separate the two when we went forth to “preach the gospel.” We became more effective when we took down our “law degree” in order that the gospel would shine forth in its simplicity. And once we finally appreciated the freedom of the grace that Jesus introduced into the world of misguided religiosity, it was a refreshing time of restoration from the presence of the Lord. It was just as Peter said to some law-obsessed Jews two thousand years ago: “*Repent and be converted so that your sins may be blotted out, in order that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord*” (At 3:19).

B. The gospel and the Bible:

Before anyone can make a distinction between the Bible and the gospel, he or she must first understand that there is a difference between the work of God in the spiritual realm in reference to our sin problem, and the Bible that was the product of the Holy Spirit on earth to record all God’s planning throughout history and eventual revelation of the gospel at the cross. It is imperative to understand that there is a difference between the redemptive plan of God and the pages of inspired documents that both recorded prophecies, as well as fulfillment of those prophecies through the incarnate Son of God. Unless one makes this distinction, he or she will never understand the power of the gospel to save and transform lives.

1. Romans 1:13-16: In the context of what Paul said in Romans 1:13-16, he revealed the difference that exists between Bible and gospel. This context was written to believing disciples, not unbelievers. It is crucial to understand this before reading the entire book of Romans that is about the gospel of God’s grace, a subject that the disciples in Rome did not fully understand. They had been baptized in the name of Jesus, but they were ignorant of all the gospel implications of what their baptism meant (See Rm 6:3-6).

The Roman disciples were unfamiliar with all the “transactions” that took place in the heavenly realm in reference to the remission of their sins. They were baptized on earth, but they did not understand all

the gospel work that took place before the throne of God. They did not understand that their baptism brought them into a covenant relationship with God when God forgave them their sins. *“Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?”* (Rm 6:3). Before the letter of Romans was written and received, they could not answer this question.

Romans was written to disciples who had a limited understanding of the gospel of grace. If one can understand this reason for Paul writing Romans, then he can understand the theme of the message about which we are writing. This brings us to the context of Romans 1:13-16.

In Paul’s introductory statement he wanted the Roman disciples to understand that he had previously planned to come to Rome. Whenever he discovered that there were those who had been baptized in the name of Jesus, he desired to go to them in order to explain further the gospel that they had obeyed. His desire to teach disciples in reference to the unsearchable treasures of God’s grace is certainly an example for us to do the same (See Rm 11:33). So the reason he wanted to go to Rome was *“that I might have some fruit among you [Christians] also”* (Rm 1:13). Paul wanted to go to Rome in order to produce some fruit among those who had already been baptized in the name of Jesus, but understood little concerning the gospel of God’s grace. This should be the desire of every evangelist. If one discovers those who have been baptized in the name of Jesus, then it should be his desire to go to these baptized believers in order to produce some gospel fruit among them by explaining to them more perfectly the way of the Lord (See At 18:24-26).

Paul said to his readers that he was a debtor to produce fruit among the disciples in Rome as he had produced fruit among all the Gentiles (Rm 1:14). However, in this statement he said nothing about how the fruit was to be produced in the hearts of the Roman disciples. The word “fruit” that he used was certainly not a reference to preaching the gospel in order to produce more converts. The Roman disciples had already been baptized in the name of Jesus. They had already obeyed the gospel, though they understood little about what happened in the spiritual realm when they were baptized. Paul thus desired to go to

them and inform them more accurately in the truth of the gospel. He wanted to produce fruit among those who had already obeyed the gospel, but were in need of more instruction in matters concerning the gospel.

Paul then revealed the means by which he would produce fruit among those who had already obeyed the gospel. “*So as much as in me is, I am ready to preach **the gospel** to you [Christians] also who are at Rome*” (Rm 1:15). It was the gospel that would produce fruit in the hearts of those who had already responded to the name of Jesus. In this context it was the gospel that would continue to produce spiritual fruit (growth) in the hearts of those who did not understand everything concerning the unsearchable riches of God’s gospel of grace. All our spiritual growth as Christians, therefore, must be attributed to the gospel. If we would claim that we have spiritually grown on our own, then we are a cult, or a member thereof.

Because Paul had been prevented in the past from making his way to Rome, he may have been somewhat apprehensive about making the journey (Rm 1:13). Therefore, in the letter of Romans he simply wrote the textbook on the gospel of grace that he wanted to share personally with the Roman disciples if he were possibly prevented again from making his way to Rome. If he eventually did make his way to Rome, then the letter of Romans would be the textbook they must study in preparation for the “Gospel Bible Class” that would be conducted upon his arrival.

This context inspires us to take another look at Romans 1:16, which we have always interpreted to refer to preaching the gospel to unbelievers. But in this context, the statement refers to preaching the gospel to believers in order that spiritual fruit might be produced and gospel living enhanced.

Our point here is that **there was a difference between the message of the gospel and the message of the letter of Romans**. In the letter, Paul wrote about the gospel, **but the letter itself was not the gospel**. He wrote in the letter that he intended to go to Rome. But the writing of his intentions was not the gospel. When we speak of the gospel of God’s grace—the theme of the letter of Romans—grace is something that is heavenly. Grace originated from the heart of God

and was revealed on earth through the cross. Grace was a heavenly gift that was revealed through an earthly event, which subsequently was explained in the words of the Roman letter about thirty years after the event occurred. Therefore, we must not confuse the gospel of grace that was revealed from heaven with a document that explains the whole gospel story.

2. 1 Corinthians 15:1-4: Though Romans speaks of the heavenly gospel of grace that originated out of heaven, in the context of 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 Paul explained the historical event that revealed this gospel on earth.

Paul reminded the Corinthians of “*the gospel which I preached to you*” (1 Co 15:1). The gospel was preached, received, stood upon, and that by which the Corinthians were saved (1 Co 15:1,2). However, in the first two verses of 1 Corinthians 15 Paul wrote only about the Corinthians’ **response** to the gospel. They heard the gospel from Paul. They believed the gospel. They repented, and subsequently obeyed the gospel. But their hearing, believing and repenting was not the gospel. This was only their **response** to the gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 15:3,4 Paul recorded the historical event that stimulated the Corinthians’ response to the gospel. He recalled that “*Christ died for our sins.*” He was buried, and “*He rose again on the third day.*” All these things occurred at least twenty years before Paul inscribed the words of 1 Corinthians. Therefore, the letter of 1 Corinthians is not the gospel. The letter was composed of words that were inspired by the Holy Spirit. In these words the apostle Paul wrote in order to recount the historical event that God used in order to reveal His gospel of grace to humanity on earth.

But we must not miss a very important point in this record that speaks of the historical event of the gospel. The crucifixion event would have been only the execution of another Jew if it were not for the statement, “*for our sins.*” The revelation, “*for God so loved the world*” (Jn 3:16), could only be illustrated through the incarnational offering of God the Son on a cross. The offering for our sins on the cross, therefore, was God’s revelation of the gospel to humanity that had been in the plan of God since before the creation.

The Bible contains all the recorded history of this good news. It contains all the events that led up to the offering. And finally, it contains revelation of all that is meant when we use the simple word “gospel.” Therefore, in preaching the gospel the first thing the evangelist must do is make a distinction between the gospel that was revealed from the throne of God, and the historical event of this revelation on earth. The next thing we must do is make a distinction between the historical record of the gospel event and the gospel itself. If we do not do this we will continue to hold up the Bible before people and erroneously proclaim, “This is the gospel.” We must understand that we teach the Bible, but we proclaim the gospel.

C. The good news:

We must be very clear about what we mean when we use the word “gospel.” We have previously stated that the gospel is not the Holy Spirit inspired record of either the event that revealed the gospel, nor is the gospel the event itself. Forgiveness and redemption are heavenly transactions where the God of the universe forgives the sin of every individual who responds to His love offering of forgiveness and redemption. The event that unleashed this powerful concession on earth was the atoning sacrifice that was made at the cross by our Lord Jesus Christ.

With obsessive interest, therefore, we work our way through the Spirit’s record of how the God of heaven revealed on earth His plan of eternal reconciliation. It all began on earth with the fertilization of a chosen seed of a chosen woman by the Holy Spirit. And when the Seed was fully developed as a child in the womb of the woman, there was a cry from the Seed in a barn in Bethlehem that eventually ended with a cry from a cross outside Jerusalem.

1. *The gospel revealed by the incarnation:* The imperfect Greek tense was used when John revealed, “*In the beginning was the Word*” (Jn 1:1). John again made use of the continuous action in past time of this verb when he added, “*The Word was with God*” (Jn 1:1). Before

the Word was revealed on earth, He was in continuous existence in the spirit form with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in eternity (Jn 4:24; Ph 2:6). So John continued with the imperfect tense when he declared, “*The Word was God*” (Jn 1:1).

It is necessary to understand that Mary, who was with child by the Holy Spirit, was pregnant with the incarnate Word of God in her womb. From eternal existence as God, “*the Word was made flesh*” through the medium of Mary (Jn 1:14). And now in the context of John 1, the verb tense changes. In order to explain this profound truth of God coming in the flesh of man, John used the aorist tense. This is the expression of a onetime event in past history. “*The Word became flesh,*” would be the best translation of the Greek phrase.

The announcement of this incarnational conception and birth was first announced on earth to shepherds: “*The angel said to them, ‘Do not fear, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy that will be to all the people’*” (Lk 2:10). And so the saga of God in the Spirit incarnate in the flesh of man began to unfold on earth through a babe in a barn. The first revelation of the gospel of the incarnate Son of God initiated the eternal gospel plan of God to bring His creation into eternal dwelling with Him. Without the incarnation, there would have been no good news from God. Gospel, therefore, had to be demonstrated, not simply declared from heaven.

2. *The gospel revealed at the cross:* If we preach the cross, without obsessing over the incarnation, then the gospel of the cross is greatly minimized, if not denied. In other words, if there were no incarnation, then the cross could be misunderstood to be only the execution of a spiritually zealous Rabbi of the Jews. Much of the world believes this.

But the One who was nailed on that cross outside Jerusalem two thousand years ago was not just a man named Jesus who was from Nazareth. It was God in the flesh. This is the conclusion that John wanted us to make by the time he finished the document of John: “*These are written [about Jesus] that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ [Messiah], the Son of God*” (Jn 20:31). If we do not reach this conclusion concerning who was crucified on the cross, then the teaching that the cross was a sacrificial atonement for our sins is simply wishful

thinking. The gospel of the cross, in other words, makes no sense unless there was an incarnation of the Son of God into the flesh of man.

3. The gospel revealed through the resurrection: If it were possible for the Son of God to terminate His own existence in the flesh, and then make His way on back to heaven as He eternally existed in the spirit before the incarnation, then the suffering and sacrifice of the cross would have been for only six hours. In fact, the two criminals who were crucified with Him would have suffered more than Jesus because they were still alive after Jesus died. They had to suffer the breaking of their legs in order to speed up their deaths (Jn 19:31-33).

There had to be more to the sacrifice of the incarnate Son of God than the cross alone. This sacrifice was certainly revealed through the resurrection. Now consider this for a moment. If the incarnation were somehow permanent, then a whole new door of revelation opens to us in reference to comprehending the awesomeness of the gospel. The resurrection would not simply have been a disturbance of Jesus' peaceful sleep in physical death. It was a resurrection into a new existence wherein He continued to be lower than God, but not in the form of God (Ph 2:6).

It is not surprising, therefore, that Paul began the letter of Romans by focusing on the power of the resurrection. In the initial chapter he reminded his readers first of the incarnation of the One who would be "*born of the seed of David according to the flesh*" (Rm 1:3). This was a prophecy of the incarnation that was fulfilled in Jesus. But then Paul continued this thought by revealing that God's "*Son Jesus Christ our Lord*" was "*declared to be the Son of God with power ... by the resurrection from the dead*" (Rm 1:4). Paul thus introduced the extremity of the gospel of the incarnation in the resurrection of the One who would continue to demonstrate grace throughout eternity. If the resurrection of His body continues throughout eternity, then the redeemed will have an eternal reminder of the sacrifice beyond the cross that the incarnate Son made for them.

In other words, if there were no true incarnation into the flesh of man, then the resurrection from the dead would have no meaning. Also consider the fact that the gospel of grace would be weak if His resur-

rection somehow restored Him to the “form of God” that He enjoyed before the incarnation (Ph 2:6). There would thus be little power in a resurrection that was not truly an incarnate bodily resurrection that had eternal consequences.

Resurrection assumed incarnation, and thus resurrection assumes that there was a continuation of that which was incarnate. Resurrection would have no meaning if Jesus was raised in the form of God in which He participated with Deity throughout eternity. On the contrary, the resurrected Jesus said to His disciples, “*A spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have*” (Lk 24:39). Though after His resurrection from the tomb it was no longer “flesh and blood” into which He was initially incarnate. It was “flesh and bones” in which He would dwell among his brethren.

Now continue the subject of the resurrection beyond the resurrection. The resurrection would mean little if Jesus could simply discard his “flesh and bones,” and then ascend on into heaven. If He had done this, then this act would be problematic in reference to what John continued to reveal in another letter. In the letter of 1 John, John wrote, “*It has not yet been revealed what we will be*” (1 Jn 3:2). Therefore, when Jesus comes again, it seems that we will not be as the “flesh and bones” that Jesus was after His own resurrection and at the time of the ascension. “Flesh and bones” was revealed to the apostles immediately after the resurrection, but one of those apostles, John, later confessed in the 1 John letter that “*it has not yet been revealed what we will be.*” The resurrected “flesh and bones” of Jesus was necessary to prove that the incarnate Son of God was resurrected, but His “flesh and bones” do not reveal what we will be, though we will be like Him. And being like Him is being like something.

Paul reminded the Corinthians, “*Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no more*” (2 Co 5:16). In other words, we no longer know Christ according to how He was revealed in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In John’s previous statement, it seems that he is also saying the same as Paul. We do not know Christ now according to “flesh and bones” into which He was resurrected. Though the apostles handled the resurrected body of Jesus,

John still said that we do not know what we will be because we do not know how He now is (1 Jn 1:1,2).

There seems to be more in store for all of us when Jesus comes again than “flesh and bones.” John explained, “*But we know that when He appears, we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He is*” (1 Jn 3:2). What we will be is a mystery for we do not know how He is now at the right hand of God. We do know, as Paul explained, that it is an attack against the gospel of the resurrection to say that we ourselves will not experience a bodily resurrection (1 Co 15:12). If there is no resurrection of our body, then the gospel of the resurrection is false (1 Co 15:13). This would make our preaching of the gospel of the resurrection fruitless because there would be no power in a fruitless hope of a resurrection (1 Co 15:14-19).

For the Corinthians, Paul began to explain the mystery of the resurrection and our dwelling with the resurrected Jesus when He comes again. Christ was the firstfruit of our own resurrection that will occur in the last day (1 Co 15:23). This will be at the time of the consummation of all things in reference to how we now dwell, as well as to how Christ will dwell with us throughout eternity (See 1 Co 15:24-28).

Now with what body will we be raised? This question should give us some thoughts concerning the body with which Jesus will come. So we reason from John’s statement in 1 John 3:2 back to the limited revelation of the body about which Paul described in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul spoke of an earthly body going into the tomb, but a heavenly body coming forth at the time of our resurrection (1 Co 15:40). It is “sown” in the earth as an earthly body that can deteriorate away, but raised as a body that can dwell for eternity (1 Co 15:42). The natural body will give way to the spiritual body (1 Co 15:44). The body to come, as Paul explains, is the same as the body that went into the tomb, but it is changed. It is changed because “*flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God*” (1 Co 15:50).

So we have difficulty understanding that which is beyond the physical world, which indeed will be our spiritual and heavenly body. For this reason Paul considers all that we will be to be a mystery (1 Co 15:51). So in reviewing what John stated as to what Jesus will be when

He appears a second time, we can only conclude that John indeed agreed with Paul that such is a mystery. The best commentary we have on the matter is 1 Corinthians 15. We can conclude that Jesus will not appear as a spirit. He will be in some bodily form that is tangible, for in such a body will we be raised.

So the gospel of the incarnation, cross and resurrection take on a more significant meaning when we study and preach these three together. If the incarnation were only a brief moment of thirty-three years in a ministry on earth, but was concluded at the ascension, then we might question the sacrifice of the incarnation. But if the resurrection establishes the fact that Jesus would remain in an eternal existence in the “flesh” of a spiritual body as we will be when He comes again, then the sacrifice of the eternal Son of God in the spirit becomes quite incredible for us to even begin to comprehend. Regardless of the limitations of our comprehension, however, at least one thing must be generated in our hearts. We must be thrown to our knees in eternal gratitude for the love of God that moved Him with such great love to do such a deed for us. And truly it is as Paul humbly wrote in a doxology, “*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out*” (Rm 11:33).

4. *The gospel revealed in the ascension:* If there were no ascension of Jesus, then we might assume that He was resuscitated in the tomb—as some of the Gnostics assumed in the second century—and then wandered off to die an old man in obscurity. For this reason the historian by inspiration of the Holy Spirit recorded what transpired with Jesus as He left this earth: While the apostles “*were looking, He was taken up and a cloud received Him out of their sight ... they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up*” (At 1:9,10).

The ascension of Jesus into heaven is good news because we know that the resurrected Jesus was truly resurrected. He did not revive in the coolness of the tomb as some have claimed. The apostles did not experience a hallucination of Him after the resurrection, as some have claimed. They did not see a spirit after the resurrection. “Flesh and bones” ascended into heaven because “flesh and bones” had stood before them after the resurrection.

5. *The gospel now revealed in the reign of King Jesus:* It is necessary to fully understand the present kingdom reign of the resurrected Son of God in order to fully appreciate who and what He presently does in reference to the world in which we now live.

Jesus presently reigns over all things. However, some have marginalized the gospel reign of King Jesus by affirming that the church and the kingdom of Jesus are the same, thus assuming that Jesus reigns now only over those who are the church. In other words, since the kingdom is supposedly only the members of the church, then the reign of King Jesus is limited only to a small group of members throughout the world. But this cannot be true.

Affirming that the kingdom of Jesus does not extend beyond the church is an attack against the present good news that Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tm 6:15). It is an attack against the fact that after Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, He was exalted *“far above all principality and power and might and dominion and every name that is named”* (Ep 1:21). It is an attack against the gospel that He *“has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him”* (1 Pt 3:22).

Though we do not now see everything subject to King Jesus, this does not mean that His kingdom is limited only to the church of submitted subjects. The Father *“put all things in subjection under his feet”* (Hb 2:8). *“For in subjecting all things to Him, He left nothing that is not put under Him”* (Hb 2:8). This is gospel news! It is good news because when we think that all things are out of control, we must remember that He has all things under His control. He upholds *“all things by the word of His power”* (Hb 1:3).

6. *The gospel of the consummation of all things:* There is an end coming, not only of the kingdom reign of Jesus, but also of all things as we now know them. The last enemy that will be subjected to King Jesus is death (1 Co 15:26). *“And when all things are subjected to Him [King Jesus], then will the Son also Himself be subject to Him who put all things under Him, so that God may be all in all”* (1 Co 15:28). When Jesus comes again, He will finalize His reign by return-

ing His unique kingdom reign to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. His reign will no longer be needed after His return.

This will be the last event of the gospel, but will have nothing written about it after it has occurred. Our only information that we understand about the final coming of Jesus was recorded two thousand years ago. There will be no more revelation needed, for after the final coming of Jesus we will know all that was in the mind of God in reference to the gospel plan that was in the mind of God before the creation of the world.

Paul, as we, know the preceding gospel. His response to this knowledge should also be our response: “***For woe is me if I do not preach the gospel***” (1 Co 9:16). If we cannot get the gospel outside the four walls of our church house, then woe should be unto us. Therefore, “*knowing the fear of the Lord we persuade men*” through the power of the gospel (2 Co 5:11).

We know that in the religious world there are those who are “*ignorant of God’s righteousness,*” and thus, they are “*seeking to establish their own righteousness*” (Rm 10:3). And for this reason, they “*have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God*” through obedience to the gospel of God’s grace (Rm 10:3). They do not know that “*Christ is the end of law for righteousness to everyone who believes*” (Rm 10:4). They do not know these things, and because they do not know the gospel, they do not have an opportunity to obey the gospel.

Therefore, would we dare keep the message of the gospel confined to our own self-righteous box? Would we keep the message to ourselves? If we do, then we have created our own self-righteous box in which we have convinced ourselves that the gospel will take us on into heaven without uttering a word to others about the good news of the Son of God who came into this world in order to take us out of this world.

Chapter 1

"THE GOSPEL BOX"

There is something about the nature of the gospel that seems to be difficult to understand for those who are in the bondage of religion. The reason for this is simply because religion and gospel are contrary to one another. If one is truly stuck in the quagmire of institutional religious belief and behavior, then comprehending the gospel can truly be quite daunting. At least this was the problem in the first century when Jesus came into a religious world where Judaism as a religion was refined as an institutional establishment.

The Jews' religion was well organized and supported. It was a financially supported structure of religion that guaranteed its perpetuation throughout the years by a full-time network of religious leaders. In fact, the Holy Spirit brought up this point when He spoke of those who were the pillars of Judaism: "*The Pharisees who were **lovers of money, heard all things and they scoffed at Him***" (Lk 16:14). They did not just scoff at the person of Jesus. They scoffed at what He taught. They perceived in His teachings that if these teachings were implemented in Israel, Judaism would come crashing down. And if Judaism came crashing down, then they would be without jobs.

Therefore, the Pharisees had to scoff. They had to dispute with Jesus and His teachings. It was their survival as a religious class of leaders that was at stake. If what Jesus taught concerning the gospel, then it would mean the end of Jewish institutional religion. Nevertheless, at least one of the prospective young men in training to be a Pharisee during the ministry of Jesus, would later conclude that the money and position of a Pharisee was not worth it when he eventually understood the nature of the gospel. A little over a decade after the ministry of Jesus, Luke recorded the preceding statement concerning the Pharisees' love of money. At the time of writing, Luke was in the presence of a converted Pharisee who finally realized the tremendous impact that the gospel has on one's life. This former Pharisee wrote, "*But*

what things were gain to me [as a Pharisee], those things I have counted lost for Christ" (Ph 3:7).

This Pharisee came to realize that being a full-time religious worker on the payroll of a religious institution was not in any way to be compared to the riches of the gospel of God's grace. But in order to fully enjoy this effect of the gospel on his own life, he had to release himself from the bondage of institutional religion. He had to release himself from the love of money as a fully supported religious worker. In fact, this gospel-living convert continued to write, "***I count all things loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things. I count them refuse so that I may gain Christ***" (Ph 3:8). In order to gain Christ, Paul knew that he had to lose religion.

At the time of the ministry of Jesus thirty years before the preceding statement was written, Paul, the Pharisee, came to realize that if he turned away from institutional Judaism, only then could he come into fellowship with King Jesus. The Pharisees' rejection of the gospel message that Jesus preached during His ministry was partly based on their love of money. Nothing has changed in the religious world since those days. When we seek to understand the gospel, especially that part concerning incarnational living, there is often great resistance by those who seek to be "full-time," and thus live off the contributions of others.

If one is a full-time worker for some religious institution, then the example of the transformation from Saul to Paul could possibly be too drastic. Nevertheless, this is what the gospel will do for—or to—someone who is in the bondage of religion for the sake of money. We must be quite clear on this point. If one either takes his or her faith back into institutional religion, or refuses to answer the call of the gospel in order to be delivered from religion, then he or she **does not truly understand the core nature of the gospel.**

It is not that a disciple must forsake all that he has in order to follow Jesus. However, he or she must be willing to do so (See Mk 10:17-31; Lk 14:25-35). And if one is willing, then that which he or she possesses as a disciple must be considered to be in use for the

Master's work. We keep in mind also that those who preach the gospel have the right to live from the gospel. *"The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel"* (1 Co 9:14). But we must not forget that those who preach the gospel are not preaching the gospel to the saved, but to the unbelievers. And because they are preaching to unbelievers, this in many cases demands that the evangelist be supported by those who have obeyed the gospel. In order to explain this, John compliments Gaius by stating that we should support those who go forth to preach the gospel to the unbelievers.

*We "do well to support them **on their journey** in a manner worthy of God. For they [evangelists] went forth for the sake of the Name, taking nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore, we ought to show hospitality to such men [support] so that we might be fellow workers for the truth [of the gospel] (3 Jn 6-8).*

In the preceding statement, we must not miss the phrase, "on their journey." These were evangelists who left home and went forth to preach the gospel to unbelievers. Those who went forth, but were married with families, sometimes had a home base as did Philip in Caesarea. But when the call came for him to go forth and preach to a Gentile from Africa, he headed out without hesitation (At 8:4,5,26; 21:8). We might say that he was a "home-based" evangelist who was not on the road continually as Timothy, Titus and Paul. Peter also had a family, and thus moved from one home base to another with his family. He was not continually on the road and away from his family. An evangelist can have a home base, but he must, as Philip, reach out from that home base in order to preach the gospel to the lost.

Now consider being an evangelist wherever one might be based. It is here that we encounter some problems in reference to the purpose of preaching the gospel that delivers one from religion. The one who claims to be preaching the gospel to "the denominations," but is simply seeking to "convert" someone from another religious group to his own religious group, does not truly understand the nature of the gospel. It may be that he is seeking to "build his church" in order to build his

salary. This moves some preachers into the realm of the Pharisees who sustained the institution in order to sustain their love of money. Therefore, this person is preaching religion, not gospel

There is simply no freedom in converting one who is in the bondage of one system of religion into another system of religious bondage. Those who do not understand the nature of the gospel are simply transferring prisoners from one jail to another. Their lack of understanding of the gospel leads them to be Pharisees who are simply recruiting more contributors to join the church of those who are also in the bondage of legal institutional religion. There is no freedom in jumping from one religious box into another. Boxes are boxes, regardless of the labels that are on the outside.

A. Identifying the oxymoron:

Have you ever heard the statement from some preacher, “We must think outside the box”? This statement will never be stated by one who knows the true nature of the gospel. It is an institutional statement. By this we mean that the very definition of institutional religion is that it creates boxes of religious rites, rituals and ceremonies that define the particular box of which one is a member. After all the rites, rituals and ceremonies are agreed upon by the adherents, then a label (name) is placed on the box in order to identify and separate the box from all other religious boxes in the community. This is institutional religious belief and behavior. It is not gospel living.

With a tagged name on the box, and one’s faithful self-sanctifying adherence to the systems of the religion that identifies his particular box, then one is a faithful member of that box. Those who are preachers of boxed religions dare not speak out against any of the identifying characteristics that make the box distinct from all other boxes in the community. If they do, then they will be tagged as rebels, and thus are in danger of losing their support. They are in danger of being disengaged from “employment” by the box maintenance authorities. This is the curse of the full-time leaders of boxed religion.

Boxes are often perpetuated simply by intimidating the “rebels” of

the boxes to "fall in line" with the heritage of each box from which they receive their support. If they endanger their boxed heritage, then they are told that their support will vanish with the box. Welcome to the world of religion and the threat of what Jesus revealed concerning the Pharisees' love of money. As the Pharisees who recognized that the gospel that Jesus preached would destroy their religious box, those today who recognize the freedom from boxed religion that is within the nature of the gospel, will likewise often fight against that which would destroy their means of support.

Boxed religionists who have discovered the truth of the gospel must first recognize that they are in a box that is defined by specific religious rites, rituals or ceremonies. They must allow the gospel to deliver them from the bondage of the box. Religious precepts and practices define the box in which they are in bondage. Therefore, unless they recognize that which causes boxed institutional religiosity, they will always remain in bondage.

Now here is the problem. Unless one truly understands the truth of the gospel, he or she can never come out of religious boxes, for religious boxes are always legally defined. The boxes themselves are legally distinguished from one another, and accordingly named after the heritage of each box. Therefore, unless one is willing to "*count all things loss [concerning his present religious box] for the excellency of the knowledge of Jesus Christ,*" then there can be no birth into the freedom one has in Christ (Ph 3:8). True freedom is never truly understood if one does not realize the religious box in which he or she dwells. Also, one can never truly understand that deliverance from one legally defined box into another legally defined box is no deliverance at all. It is simply moving from one prison to another.

The title of this chapter is an **oxymoron**. We like the *Webster's Dictionary* definition of this word: An oxymoron is "a figure of speech in which opposite or contradictory ideas or terms are combined." "Gospel" and "box" are opposites. They are contrary to one another. When we speak of "gospel," we are speaking of freedom from religion. When we speak of "boxes," we are speaking of bondage in religion. These two—gospel and religious boxes—are **simply contrary to one an-**

other. There is simply no such thing as a “gospel box.” If one believes there is, then he or she does not truly understand the truth of the gospel. If one believes that his box is “scriptural,” then the gospel that he is preaching may actually be the “other gospel” about which Paul warned the Galatians (See Gl 1:6-9). In other words, if the foundation of one’s box is defined by law, then Paul reminded the Galatians, “*You have been severed from Christ, you who seek to be justified by law. You have fallen from grace*” (Gl 5:4). Those who would seek to define their box legally by law should read this statement again. And once read, he or she should digest the letter that Paul wrote to the Romans. In that letter one statement should be a warning to all those who would seek to live legally in any box of self-justification: “*For sin will not have dominion over you, for you are not under law, but under grace*” (Rm 6:14). Sin always dwells in legal boxes. In fact, religious boxes are always the product of legalistic theology.

B. Clarifying religion:

The more one is into religion, the more difficult it is to understand the gospel of grace. The reason for this is simple. Religion depends on the legal performance of the adherent who is associated with a particular religion. The legal performance of the adherent of ceremonies of a particular religion, therefore, always results in two unfortunate conclusions: First, the adherent of a particular religion satisfies himself legally that he is justified before God because of his legal performance of the codes that define the boxed religion of which he is a member. He has convinced himself that he is sanctified of sin if he faithfully adheres to what defines his particular religious box. For example, once he goes through some performing ceremony on Sunday morning, his conscience is cleared for the week. It is cleared because he has convinced himself that he is found faithful through his legal performance of the required Sunday morning “acts of worship” that are characteristic with his particular church.

Second, one must be assured that his particular religious group is the correct sect, and thus legally defined as distinct from all the other

boxes in his community. Therefore, there are certain legal codes that must be believed and performed in order to convince the adherent that he is connected with the “true church.” In this scenario of validation, the adherent uses the New Testament as a legal code of doctrine in order to build a structure of law that reassures all the adherents that they are the right church. Every other group in the community is the wrong church because they do not conform to the legally defined laws of the “right church.” As a result, the legalities of the “right church” become more important than the gospel of the incarnate Son of God. When the legal religionist shows up at the assembly, his focus is on the correct legal performance of assembly ceremonies. His obsession, therefore, is more on legal performance than on the gospel of the atoning sacrifice of the incarnate Son of God. It is for this reason that the assemblies of religionists will almost always turn into opportunities to entertain those who come together for their own amusement.

We would assert that the preceding two deviations are entirely contrary to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The two points focus on man, as well as our ability to construct some form of “doctrine” by which we would assure ourselves that we are the legally correct church. But the preceding points focus on our own performance of law, and not on the gospel of grace. The first point sets up the adherents of the “right church” for endless squabbles concerning which points of “doctrine” are correct and applicable for believers today to perform. The second point throws all the adherents of the “right church” into the quagmire of the first point, that is, performing all the required codes of identity in order to identify the “right church.” **This is not gospel behavior.** Both scenarios marginalize the gospel, and thus move the adherents into institutional religion.

Chapter 2

THE INCARNATE WORD OF GOD

In the decade leading up to the consummation of national Israel,

the Holy Spirit knew that it was now time to speak to the Gentiles of the Roman Empire that the gospel was not connected to any specific religious group of this world. But specifically, the Holy Spirit wanted the world to know that Christianity was not just another religious box of Judaism. Since the world knew that Judaism was divided into various sects, the Holy Spirit wanted both religious idolaters and Roman government officials of the day to understand that Rome's determination to solve the Jewish problem of insurrection was a solution that was to be directed against Judaism, and not Christians, specifically Jewish Christians.

John wanted the Roman government to know that Christianity was not connected with the radical insurrectionist movement of zealot Jews against Rome. The Holy Spirit, therefore, wrote a special letter of revelation in order to inform the Gentile world that Christians based their faith on the gospel, and not on the heritage of the Jews. Christianity was not an organized institutional religion as Judaism. It was the reflection of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the lives of submissive believers.

In the first document to defend Christians, the Holy Spirit directed the hand of John to introduce the origin of Christianity, which origin was based on the incarnation of God, not on the heritage of traditions of some religious group, specifically Judaism. In this document, John wrote, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*" (Jn 1:1). This was the beginning of the Christian's faith. This gospel intention existed long before Adam and Abraham.

The Romans believed in a beginning of all things. Centuries before, even the Greek philosophers before John had used the Greek word *logos* (word) to refer to the communication of God (Zeus, or whoever) with humanity. Therefore, John in some way connected with his Gentile readers by choosing this word out of the Greek dictionary in order to explain the origin of the Christians' faith. It was this Word (*Logos*) that "*was in the beginning with God*" (Jn 1:2). Whatever the Gentiles' view of God would have been at the time of writing, John affirmed that the faith of Christians was based on something far greater than the traditions of the Jews.

Those who put their trust in the traditions of the Jewish fathers were at the time in rebellion against Rome in order to restore their own Jewish independence. John wanted all Gentiles to know that Christianity was not another sect (box) of Judaism, and thus, had no part in the insurrectionist movement of the Jews. Christianity had its origins directly from God through the revelation of the Word of God.

We are now beginning to understand the source and nature of the gospel. Gospel has nothing to do with the doctrines and commandments of men on earth, nor the religious heritage of some box of religious rites, rules and ceremonies. It has nothing to do with either religious heritages or traditions. The gospel deals first with God in heaven. So John continued to defend this origin of Christianity with the statement, *“All things were made by Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made”* (Jn 1:3).

Only God can create, and thus, John was assured that his readers would conclude that this “Word” had to be of the nature and essence and origin of God in order to create (Hb 11:3). The Spirit had previously explained this only a few years earlier to those disciples who were residing in the heart of the Gentile world in the city of Colossi: *“For by Him [the Word] all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible.... All things were created through Him and for Him”* (Cl 1:16).

We must keep in mind that these are statements that were written in the midst of great social upheaval in the Roman Empire. The social chaos of the time was caused by zealot Jews who were seeking to restore national Israel as it was back in the days of the Jews’ glory with King David and Solomon. For this reason, John wanted all Gentile readers throughout the Roman Empire during the 60s to know that Christianity had no connection with the preservation of some Jewish heritage, or the Jews’ own traditions. The “gospel according to John,” therefore, is a document of defense that was written to a Gentile world. John sought to defend the fact that Jesus, the Christ, was the Son of God who came down out of heaven (Jn 3:13; 6:38). He came out of heaven, not out of Judaism. He was not the product of Jewish religiosity. Christians were those who believed in this origin of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit wanted the Gentile world at the time of John's writing to know that the gospel was not a religious invention that developed from either the heritage or religious traditions of the Jews. All those traditional teachings that defined the box of the Jews' religion had no place in the nature of the gospel that was revealed from heaven through the incarnate Word of God. The gospel simply originated out of heaven, though the prophecy of it was made throughout the centuries to the nation of Israel. But even during the two thousand years of prophetic history from Abraham to John the Baptist, no Jewish prophet could conceive of heaven's gospel revelation that finally came to the apostles in A.D. 30 in Jerusalem (1 Pt 1:10-12).

If we were a Roman government official living in the 60s prior to the consummation of national Israel in A.D. 70, and we picked up a copy of the gospel definition of Christianity that John wrote, then we would be able to separate Judaism from Christianity. John skillfully portrayed the conflict that existed between Jesus and the Jewish leaders throughout His ministry. This is why the document of John was directed specifically to Gentiles, not Jews. And this is why the first readers of the document could clearly understand in the book of John that the man Jesus was not just another Jewish Rabbi. In His confrontation with Jewish leaders during His ministry, Jesus, as the Romans, was in conflict with institutional Judaism. John assumed that his Gentile readers would conclude that the gospel revelation of the Word would eventually supplant all religion, specifically Judaism.

By the end of the document of John, John wanted his Gentile readers to understand that Christianity was not based on a man. It was based on the revelation of the incarnate Son of God.

*Jesus [the man] did many other signs in the presence of His disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you [Gentiles] might believe that Jesus is the **Christ** [Messiah], the **Son of God**, and that believing you might have life through His name [authority]" (Jn 20:30,31).*

The Son of God indeed came into the world in Bethlehem through a natural birth. However, after John had progressed through his narra-

tive of the origin of Jesus, it was evident that this Jesus was the hope of Israel. He was the Messiah. Those insurrectionist Jews against whom the Romans were unleashing their wrath had rejected the Messiahship of Jesus, and thus, the Romans needed to be convinced that according to Christians there were no more messiahs to come (See Mt 24:24-26; Lk 24:44). The Jewish insurrectionists of the Empire had missed the only Messiah that God intended to send to national Israel.

But in the above conclusion of John, John went beyond the fulfillment of prophecies in reference to the Messiah. His focus was on what Jesus did in reference to controlling the physical world (See Jn 5:31-47). John referred his readers back to the statements that he made at the beginning of his defense document. He went back into the corridors of heaven when the Son of God, as the Creator, was the Word with God and was God. This Word of God was sent into a physical world that He created in order to reveal the gospel that was in the mind of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit before the creation of the world.

When speaking of origins, John wanted his Gentile readers to understand the self-proclaimed origin of the One who was born in Bethlehem. *“For I [Jesus] came down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me”* (Jn 6:38). And if anyone needed proof of this, John asked them to remember what Jesus stated to His audience: *“For the works that the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me”* (Jn 5:36). Jesus was not the product of Judaism. He was the Word of God who came out of heaven in order to reveal the good news of redemption that had been planned since the creation of the world. This foreplanned redemption was valid only if the One against whom sin was committed was standing in the midst of all sinners.

John 17 is the best commentary on this subject. In the final hours of His earthly residence, Jesus lifted up His eyes to heaven and said, *“Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son so that Your Son also may glorify You”* (Jn 17:1). Since these words were stated on the night of His betrayal, Jesus prayed to the Father, *“Glorify Me with Yourself with the glory that I had with You before the world was”* (Jn 17:5). So in speaking of Himself as the revealed Word of God, Jesus continued,

“For I have given to them [the apostles] the words that You gave Me” (Jn 17:8). And in reference to the apostles, He prayed that they “*have known surely that I came forth from You. And they have believed that You sent Me*” (Jn 17:8). In one brief statement, Jesus revealed who He was and what He did: “*I have given them Your word*” (Jn 17:14). This was the work of the Word of God. Jesus did not refer to a catechism of doctrines that He delivered to the apostles. **He had given them Himself.**

The phrase “Word of God” is thus not a reference to a systematic code of doctrine by which the Father delivered the message (word) of the gospel to humanity. Jesus was the message. The deliverance of the Word of God had all been accomplished **before** the writing of any New Testament books. The Word of God in the context of John’s documents was the incarnate Son of God, not doctrinal catechisms. The Father so loved the world that He gave us His Son (Jn 3:16). This is gospel. This result of His love for us did not conclude only in giving instructions to direct our behavior. His love resulted first in the gospel of His Son who inspires godly living according to His will. It is as Paul wrote, “*Do we then make void law through faith [in Christ]? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish law*” (Rm 3:31). Therefore, Paul continued, “*I delight in the law of God according to the inward man*” (Rm 7:22).

But from the preceding, we should take another look at John 17:17 in the entire context of John 17: “**Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.**” Therefore—do not miss this point—in the context it is the Word of God (the incarnate Son of God) who is the truth that was revealed for the sanctification of the souls of men. The “truth” is not a revealed code of catechisms that must be outlined as law on paper in order to be preached as a system of sanctification if obediently followed. The revealed Son of God is the truth, not some doctrine that is orchestrated as law to be obeyed, and if obeyed, one can justify himself before God. The incarnate Son of God was the truth that was revealed to us for our sanctification. In fact, if we try to sanctify ourselves through some contrived system of law, then we marginalize, if not deny the sanctification of the Truth (Word) of God who was crucified on the cross for our sanctification.

Since the Word of God (the Son of God) is the truth that sanctified us through His incarnational offering, then the Word of God has authority in our lives. This was the meaning of what Jesus said in John 12:48: *“He who rejects Me and does not receive My words, has one who judges him. The word that I have spoken, the same will judge him in the last day.”*

Chapter 3

REVELATION OF THE WORD OF GOD

The Word of God was more than a man and more than an earthly Messiah whom the Jews incorrectly assumed would restore national Israel. The Word was the person of the Son of God who had heavenly origins, and thus, had no earthly aspirations in reference to a worldly kingdom reign. His kingdom was simply not of this world (See Jn 18:36). We must continue this understanding into the second document (Revelation) that John wrote in order to encourage all Christians, especially Jewish Christians.

Though John had in the back of his mind the Gentiles who would eventually bring down judgment on national Israel in A.D. 70, the Holy Spirit turned John’s thinking to the subject of God’s judgment of those who would bring judgment on Israel. He would before the consummation of national Israel—the time which John did not know—ask Jewish Christians to remember that in Israel’s past God used nations of the world as Assyria and Babylonia in order to bring judgment on apostate Israel. These were nations that God used by proxy to judge His people who had gone into apostasy. However, these nations were eventually judged themselves by God. Though God used unbelieving nations to punish His people, He eventually brought judgment on those He used to judge His people. This was a principle of judgment on the part of God throughout the history of Israel, specifically during the years of the judges of Israel (See Jg 2:11-15). It was now time for God to move in the same way against Rome, which nation of government would

eventually be consummated by the middle of the fifth century.

The document of Revelation was a reassuring message that God had not changed His means by which He judged the nations of this world. Through the revelation of the Word of God, He would again preserve a remnant of Israel out of the nations of the world. Therefore, in the visions of Revelation the Holy Spirit turned His attention to God's judgment of the Roman Empire.

In the writing of the document of Revelation, John did not want the Romans to understand that their end would also be the work of God. Revelation, therefore, was written in the style of apocalyptic literature with cryptic symbols (Rv 1:1). The Jewish Christians at the time of writing could understand the visions of Revelation. However, those who were not familiar with either Jewish history or the Old Testament could not understand the visions of the book. And in many cases, since we ourselves are removed over two thousand years from the writing of the document, as well as the experiences of the Jews at the time of writing, we also have some difficulty understanding portions of the book.

Those Jewish Christians who read the document of Revelation knew precisely what John was saying. Because of their historical background and knowledge of Old Testament history, they understood that the nation who brought judgment upon apostate Israel would eventually have judgment brought upon them. It is for this reason that the document of Revelation was possibly written before the consummation of national Israel in A.D. 70.

At the time, the Holy Spirit wanted to bring some comfort to Jewish Christians who personally witnessed the decimation of their national heritage. If Revelation were not written until the latter part of the first century, then surely the visions of the book had been revealed to John before A.D. 70, which visions he communicated to the church before the fall of Jerusalem.

The message of the visions was that the Jewish Christians would survive the consummation of national Israel in A.D. 70. As the church, they would continue to be the reflection on earth of the kingdom reign of Jesus from heaven. During His ministry, Jesus specifically prom-

ised this to the Jewish believers in His audience. In the context of His prophecy of the consummation of national Israel, He stated “*Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father*” (Mt 13:43). National Israel had to be extracted from the scene of world history before the world could understand that God’s work was no longer through the Jews, but through the new Israel of God, the church. In other words, before the world could focus exclusively on Jesus as the revealed Word of God, all religious distractions in reference to Judaism had to be removed. Those who lived in obedience to the gospel could shine forth to the unbelieving world only when the confusion of Judaism was removed. When the unbelieving Jews realized that their God did not spare them through the destruction of Jerusalem, then they would reconsider that Jesus was the Word of God who was revealed through the preservation of His body of believers.

Therefore, John carried the metaphor of the incarnate Word of God into the book of Revelation. At the very beginning of Revelation, the Lord Jesus surely referred back to John’s gospel account of Jesus when He revealed in the book of Revelation that “*He sent and signified it [the visions of revelation] by His angel to His bondservant John, who testified to **the Word of God** and to the testimony of Jesus Christ*” (Rv 1:1,2). John had previously in the “gospel according to John” testified to the Word of God in His testimony to the Jews (Jn 1:1-3). In this introductory verse of Revelation, the Lord Jesus here linked the two documents of John and Revelation.

The first document (John) was a defense that through the Word of God, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit declared the gospel to the world through the incarnate Son. The second document (Revelation) revealed that regardless of all the social chaos through which Jewish Christians were about to go, God was still working with Israel as He did throughout their history. At the time of writing, or when the visions occurred, the Word of God was no longer on earth, but was reigning as King of kings and Lord of lords at the right hand of God (1 Tm 6:15). If the Jews rejected His will while He was on earth, then He would bring destruction upon them (See Hs 4:6). They subsequently rejected Him, and thus, God brought down judgment upon them (See Jn 1:11).

There is a specific theme that is maintained throughout John's documents of both John and Revelation. The focus of both documents is on the Word of God in the person of the incarnate Son of God. Emphasis is not on a catechism of rites, rituals or ceremonies that would identify some organized religious structure. This is abundantly clear in both documents. In the document of gospel that John wrote, John wanted to turn his readers' attention directly to the Word of God. He wanted his readers to focus on Jesus as the Son. In the document of Revelation, his focus was on the reigning Word of God.

Since our focus must be on the person of the Word of God, then we must concentrate on the present gospel reign of King Jesus. Those who lead in the defense of this kingdom reign are the obedient subjects of His kingdom. In other words, those who defend Jesus as the reigning Messiah (Christ), as the incarnate Son of God, are those who are the church. We must never reverse this order. We do not doctrinally defend the church, and thus make ourselves as the "true church" the defenders of the Son of God as the revealed Word of God. It is always the other way around. We are defenders of His church because He is the present reigning Word of God. All judgment has now been given unto Him (At 17:30,31). At this time, the sword of judgment goes forth from His mouth (Rv 1:16).

Because our King is the Word of God who revealed the gospel to the world, we are simply those of all His kingdom of subjects who have responded to His message, and thus we are the manifestation on earth of His kingdom reign from heaven. Our existence as the church is evidence that He is the Word of God through whom God has communicated to mankind. This is precisely what Paul meant when he wrote that "*the manifold wisdom of God*" was made known to many through the church (Ep 3:10).

We are sure that many will miss this point in reference to our discussions concerning the gospel. When we use the word "gospel," meaning good news, we **are not** talking about some systematic theology that is propagated by the subjects of the kingdom, as was the case of Judaism that inspired nationalistic aspirations for Jewish independence. On the contrary, we **are not** talking about defending religious heritages.

We **are not** talking about the doctrines and commandments of man, nor the religious traditions of some sect. **We are discussing a personality, an entity, an incarnation of God Himself.** Submitted subjects of the kingdom reign of King Jesus are the church of His subjects on earth.

The Word of God was, and is, a personality. John was clear on this matter. *“And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father”* (Jn 1:14). It is the Word of God as the incarnate revelation of the person of God into this world who must receive all glory. This is what Jesus said: *“If God is glorified in Him [the Son], God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will immediately glorify Him”* (Jn 13:32).

Those religious groups that establish their foundation for existence on the religious heritage of their fathers have missed the point. Some groups even preach the doctrines of the New Testament as the gospel. These too have missed the point. They turn the gospel into a system of law by which they can identify themselves as the “true church” because they perform according to a system “sound doctrine.”

It is preaching Christ and His gospel crucifixion for our sins that defines us as the church (See 1 Co 1:23). Preaching specific subjects as the Lord’s Supper is not preaching the gospel, for the Supper is not the gospel. It is a remembrance of the gospel. We teach the Supper to all those who have obeyed the gospel. The Supper would mean nothing if it were not for the truth of the gospel. Likewise, preaching acappella singing is not preaching the gospel, for we sing in praise of the gospel of the revealed Word of God. Preaching a supposed name of the church is not preaching the gospel, for the church is the assembly of all those who have obeyed the gospel. Even preaching baptism is not preaching the gospel, for baptism is a response to the gospel. Paul was clear on this matter. *“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel”* (1 Co 1:17). Therefore, if one would preach the gospel, then he, as Paul, must *“preach Christ crucified”* (1 Co 1:23). The Holy Spirit instructed the behavior of those who have obeyed the gospel, but the instructions for gospel living are not the gospel.

Gospel refers to the sacrificial atonement of God in the flesh who

was nailed to a cross outside Jerusalem. This gospel atonement that was revealed from the throne of God continues to this day. The word of God was revealed in the person of Jesus two thousand years ago. In the book of Revelation, Jesus, through the visions, wanted to reassure us that He was still alive and in control of all things (Hb 1:3). His present gospel reign reassures us that He was the only One who was worthy to reign because of His incarnate offering (See Rv 4:9-11).

We can determine if one is a preacher of a religious sect if he preaches primarily the identity of his sect, with little focus on Jesus Christ and Him crucified for the sins of the world. We have witnessed that there are so many who are indoctrinated with the doctrine and traditions of their particular religious sect that they cannot distinguish between the gospel of the incarnate Word of God and the identity of their religion. Those who cannot make this distinction are actually preaching, as Paul wrote, “another gospel” (Gl 1:6-9). They are preaching “another gospel” because they are preaching the gospel of the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, ascended, and reigning Son of God, **plus** all the added traditions of their particular religious box. They are subsequently preaching the gospel with required rites, rituals or ceremonies that identify their particular sect.

We can understand now the mission of the early evangelists as they went forth to preach the gospel. As John, they were persecuted for preaching the revelation of God through the incarnate Word of God (Rv 1:9). Nevertheless, regardless of all the opposition from those who were boxed in religion, they continued unabated to preach the Word of God, that is the person of the incarnate Son of God. In preaching Jesus as the Christ and Son of God, they were seeking to bring people out of religion and into the freedom they can enjoy in Christ.

If one does not understand the nature of the gospel, therefore, he is not a preacher of the simple gospel. He has complicated the message of the gospel by adding law to the gospel. For example, if he is preaching “the Lord’s Supper on the first day of the week” as the gospel, then he is trying to preach law, not the simple gospel of the incarnate and atoning sacrifice of the Word of God about whom the Supper is to be our reminder. Some have enacted so many rites, rituals and ceremo-

nies surrounding the observance of the Supper that they have marginalized their focus of the Word of God about whom the Supper is to remind us.

If one is preaching some unique name of the church as the gospel, then he is preaching an addition to the gospel of the atoning sacrifice of the Word of God. He is preaching the gospel plus law, and thus preaching another gospel than that which was preached in the first century in order to deliver people out of the boxes of religion in order to celebrate freedom through the Lord's Supper. In other words, we must not substitute, or add to good subjects for Bible study and teaching for the gospel of the Son of God who gave Himself for us. There is simply a difference between law and that which inspires us to be obedient to the instructions of the Holy Spirit in the Bible.

When one finds himself involved in endless squabbles with others over opinions and contradictory theologies, it is time to reevaluate one's primary focus in reference to the person of the incarnate Word of God who is now reigning as King of kings. Even if one finds himself in debates over valid teachings of truth, he must continually remind himself that when preaching, he must focus on the gospel. We must teach the revealed written word of God at all times. However, we must not forget that the Bible, and the teachings therein, are not the gospel. The incarnate Son of God who gave Himself for our redemption is the gospel. The Bible explains this clearly. We preach the gospel that is revealed in the Bible. We do not preach the Bible as the gospel.

Chapter 4

BURSTING OUT OF BOXES

It is so easy to move into a religious cocoon (box). And once inside, everyone who is there does not realize that they have enclosed themselves into their own warm fellowship, being unconscious of the fact that they have moved away from all other religious cocoons in the community. We would think that those who are living the gospel would

behave in the reverse, just as it is in nature.

In nature, it is first the cocoon, but then there is the burst from the cocoon when the beauty of the butterfly is released into all the world. This is nature. We would think that this would be natural among those who have obeyed the gospel. But we have found in many cases that the reverse is true. In reference to the message of the gospel that must burst forth into all the world, we have discovered that many seek to function contrary to the nature of the gospel. This feeling among some is so strong that “evangelism” has simply become an exercise of inviting others to come into our own denominated cocoon, which cocoon is identified by certain trademarks that separate it from all other cocoons in the community. But this is not the nature of the gospel, nor was this the function of the early Christians.

The gospel does not develop legal cocoons into which we seek to invite others through the preaching of a list of statutes that define a particular cocoon. The gospel invites people into Christ. And it is in Christ where people of faith enjoy freedom from cocoons. Those who are obedient to the gospel are inherently free in their fellowship with one another (See 1 Jn 1:3). They are made free through grace, and thus they are in fellowship with one another by their common obedience to the gospel.

We realize that some early Jewish Christians initially had some difficulty in this area because they wanted to maintain a culturally cocooned identity of Christianity. They struggled to break down the middle wall of partition that divided Jews and Gentiles (Ep 2:14). It took a vision from God to a Christ-sent apostle, and then an angel, in order to get Peter out of his cultural cocoon and into the house of a Gentile (See At 10). And then when he was in the Gentile’s house, it took the Holy Spirit to signal with the speaking in languages that the gospel did not establish cultural cocoons (See At 10:44). Once the Spirit came upon the Gentiles on that occasion, by his direct question to those Jews who were with him, Peter revealed that he was convinced. He almost dared any of the Jews present to object to baptizing those Gentiles in the house to which he had just preached the gospel (At 10:47).

But the preceding story was not over when those Gentiles immersed from the waters of baptism. When Peter returned to Jerusalem, “*those who were of the circumcision [Jewish Christians] **disputed with him***” (At 11:2). They disputed with Peter for stepping outside the box of “Jewish Christianity,” and into the cocoon (house) of a Gentile. The dispute revealed that the Jerusalem cocoonists were initially more interested in preserving a Christianity that was identified by Jewish culture than by the nature of the inclusive gospel. They were very upset when they heard that Peter had stepped outside the box.

We have found that cocooned brethren have not changed much since those days. They are still disputing with those who seek to step outside the comfort of their own religious cocoon in order to take the gospel into the houses of the Gentiles. They will dispute with those who would dare take a step outside the cocoon of the saved in order to preach the gospel to the unsaved wherever they are in their houses of worship.

Fortunately for all of us who are reading this narrative, the Jewish disputers of Jerusalem repented of their waywardness. They repented of their disputing when Peter explained to them that he was on a gospel mission to preach to the Gentiles. Their repentance was according to the nature of the gospel that we must break out of denominating cocoons in order that the message of the gospel be preached in the religious cocoons of denominated religious groups wherever we are allowed in their assemblies. Luke wrote of their repentance: “*When they heard these things [that were explained by Peter], **they held their peace and glorified God***” (At 11:18).

Nevertheless, this ordeal did not solve the Jewish cocoonism that was so prevalent in the church of Jerusalem. In fact, a few years later Paul wrote of the problem when there was an attempted legalization of the “gospel” in Jerusalem according to Jewish traditions. “*This happened because of **false brethren** secretly brought in, **who sneaked in to spy out our liberty that we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage***” (Gl 2:4). We must not forget that the Holy Spirit in this statement identified as false brethren those who would endanger our freedom in Christ.

It seems that after the experience of entering the house of the Gentile Cornelius, and subsequently being confronted by some disputing Jewish brethren, Peter himself could not shake off being intimidated by those who sought to bring the church into the bondage of legal theology. In fact, several years after the “disputing” encounter with some Jewish brethren in Jerusalem when he returned from the house of Cornelius, Peter went to Antioch of Syria (Gl 2:11). Upon his arrival there, he initially sat down at the dinner table with the Gentile brethren of Antioch. But when some of the Jewish cocoonists came up from Jerusalem, “*he withdrew and separated himself*” from the Gentile brethren (Gl 2:12). He did this because he feared those brethren from Jerusalem who were intimidating other leaders into conforming to “their gospel,” which was indeed another gospel (Gl 1:6-9). These Jewish brethren were preaching the gospel. But they were also attaching other religious rites and rituals that they taught that must be obeyed in order to be justified before God, specifically the religious rite of circumcision (See At 15:1).

The Antioch incident indeed reveals something very important in reference to the nature of the gospel of freedom that we preach. **If anyone would legally bind on the church as law any cultural matter or opinion that is not bound by God, then that person is preaching a gospel of exclusion, which is another gospel.** The entire letter of Galatians was written in order to confront those who preached this other gospel of legal justification.

Paul’s entire argument in Galatians is that those who have been set free in their obedience to the gospel are not to be brought into the bondage of any unique religious cocoon that is identified by religious ceremonies, rites and rituals wherein one is supposedly justified. In the following statement, Paul concluded his exhortation to the free: “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage*” (Gl 5:1).

We deny our freedom in Christ when we, as Peter, are intimidated to enter the house of the Gentiles. We stand condemned as Peter if we succumb to such intimidation (Gl 2:11). Since the intimidation is based on conformity to religious rites and rituals, or even customs, then we

stand condemned by our failure to defend the freedom that we have in Christ through our obedience to the gospel.

For this reason, we do not see many seeking to preach the gospel in the assemblies of other cocoons other than our own. Unfortunately, we often discourage evangelists from going to assemblies where devout religious people are meeting. We have often established a culture of intimidation among ourselves that would discourage those who are gifted to preach the gospel to anyone of faith who is of another group. We would rather establish our own cocoons in which to preach “gospel meetings.” We would rather preach our own campaigns than ask other groups if we can come into their cocoon to preach the gospel that will set them free from religious cocoonism. If we are timid about answering an invitation to preach the gospel in the assembly of another church than the one for which we ordinarily preach, then we are possibly suffering from cocoonism. If we are intimidated by others not to preach for those who invite us to come, then we, as Peter, stand condemned.

However, there may be another problem. If we dispute with those evangelists who seek to preach in every religious center throughout the world, thinking that these evangelists may be compromised in their faith, then it might be true that we are promoting a legalized “church.” We may be preaching and defending our religious heritage, and not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, we may not ourselves understand the nature of the truth of the gospel, but have confused it with legal points on a doctrinal outline that identifies our particular religious group.

If this is the case, then we are in the same position as those churches who have long forgotten that “church” is the serendipity of the gospel, not the other way around. Our “gospel” message is not church, but the incarnate Son of God who is now King of kings. It is King Jesus to whom we all must be connected, not to our favorite group that is identified by a specific set of doctrines and traditions. If this is the case in reference to our discouraging others from going out among religionists to preach the truth of the gospel, then we need to take another look at the foundation of our own faith. Is the foundation for our faith the church or Christ? If it is the church, then we can be assured that we are

not totally loyal to Christ. Our total loyalty to Christ may have been compromised, as the disputing brethren in the Jerusalem church who could not separate culture from Christ.

Our loyalty to Christ is revealed in our loyalty to His body. We must not compromise our loyalty to Christ with the trademarks of our own religious heritage. If we do so, then we are not the church of Christ about which we read in the New Testament.

We remember almost fifty years ago asking a local religious group if we could address the assembly of their church. After a brief “questioning” by the local pastor, we were lined up to preach one Sunday morning. We have since preached the gospel to hundreds of assemblies of people who have come together to hear more about Jesus.

Sometimes you just have to ask. And if you know the gospel, it is the gospel that people want to hear. We preach the gospel, not church. Church is the serendipity of preaching the gospel. Our behavior as the church is not the standard by which we would judge one another. We are thankful that the Holy Spirit never used the behavior of the church in Corinth as the model by which we all must judge ourselves as the church.

Unfortunately, some have preached the gospel for so long within the confines of their own halls that they have subconsciously become cocooned within themselves. They have developed the inability to separate gospel from church, and thus when they think they are preaching the gospel, they are actually preaching church. Cocoon preachers no longer know how to preach to those who have not been cloned after their traditional assemblies. The world is not hearing the gospel message, therefore, because we have trapped the preachers of the gospel in our own assemblies Sunday after Sunday, often denying them the opportunity to go preach in some “synagogue” in the community. They have preached to the choir Sunday after Sunday for so long that they have often forgotten to preach the gospel to the orchestra of unbelievers outside the church house who want to know more about the gospel.

At the same time, we hinder the preaching of the gospel by intimidating those who would accept every invitation to preach the gospel to those who have a difficult time connecting all the gospel dots.

Cocoonists often dispute with those evangelists who seek to preach the gospel to all people of faith. They do so by accusing people like Peter of “fellowshipping the Gentile denominationalists.” Or, they do so by accusing that those evangelists who are entering the synagogues of others “are no longer with us.” Or, they accuse that they have “lost the identity of our cocoon.” Sooner or later each preacher must make a decision as to whether he will join the delegation of disputers who came out to confront Peter about stepping outside the church cocoon of Jews, or whether he will join the delegation of those who were returning from the house of Cornelius. Choose your delegation.

This discussion is all simply nonsense when we consider the nature of the gospel. The disputers have brought themselves into the bondage of their own legal cocoon by forgetting the very nature of the gospel. They do not understand that it is the nature of good news to be proclaimed to everyone, especially to those who are sitting in “synagogues,” waiting for someone to come and explain to them more perfectly the way of the Lord. It is the nature of the gospel never to form an exclusive church cocoon that would bar anyone from coming into Christ because we are afraid to take Christ into all the world.

If we presume to answer the prayer of Jesus for unity among all those who believe in Him (Jn 17:20,21), then it is certainly imperative that we are out among those who believe in Jesus in order to preach the unifying effect of the gospel.

The Holy Spirit realized that cocooning religiously was a dangerous trend into which many would fall. Throughout the metropolitan area of Ephesus there were a number of groups meeting in the homes of the members. In reference to such meetings, **the Holy Spirit knew that it was natural for disciples to bond so tightly with one another that they would behave unnaturally in reference to the unifying nature of the gospel.** Their fellowship with one another on a regular basis could sometimes lend them to being exclusive of others. Therefore, He mandated that all the disciples in Ephesus be “*eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*” (Ep 4:3). This mandate was not to some autonomous group on Main Street. It was directed to each individual member of the body throughout the area of Ephesus,

regardless of where each member sat on Sunday morning.

On his last visit to Ephesus, Paul warned the leaders of the church that the time would come when some home assemblies among all the disciples would cocoon themselves under different leaders. He warned,

For I know this, that after my departure grievous wolves will enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from your own selves will men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves (At 20:29,30).

It is significant to note that it would specifically be some among the leaders who would draw away disciples after themselves. These would be leaders as Diotrephes who would form their own autonomous groups over which they would exercise control through intimidation (3 Jn 9,10). As those Jewish leaders who came to Antioch in order to intimidate Peter, leaders as Diotrephes intimidate evangelists from going into the houses of the Gentiles, or synagogues of the Jews, or even the temples of the idolaters (3 Jn 10). It is simply the nature of cocoonists to establish their own autonomous cocooned assemblies that they legally identify by a code of laws, or the dominance of their favorite personality. All those who do not conform to the code of the cocoon, or the demands of the separatist leader, have “left the church.” Or as in the case of Diotrephes, they are kicked out of the church (3 Jn 10).

No one group of disciples should withdraw themselves from any other group of disciples simply because they are familiar only with the behavior performance of their own assembly. There is no assembly behavior prescribed in the New Testament that would warrant us to establish an assembly standard by which we would judge any other assembly of saints to be “scriptural”. Cocoonism is simply contrary to the nature of the universal fellowship of the body of Christ that is produced by the gospel, regardless of where the members sit on Sunday. It is for this reason that there is absolutely no example in the New Testament of one group of disciples separating themselves as a group from any other group of disciples.

If any one group of disciples would live after the nature of the gospel, then that group must always be eager to fellowship other disciples who have also obeyed the gospel. They must also be eager to send disciples into the houses of the unbelievers in order to preach the gospel. We must do this in order that others also enjoy the unity that all Christians have in Christ. Gospel brings us together. However, if we are in the bondage of religion, then we keep moving further away from one another.

In fact, if one group of disciples seeks to withdraw themselves from another group, then it is evident that the group that takes the initiative to withdraw from other groups on the basis of “doctrinal matters” has defined itself to be involved in religion. The members have so defined themselves because such group division is contrary to the very nature of the gospel. We see no groups of disciples in the first century withdrawing from other groups on the basis of doctrinal matters. Withdrawal behavior is always in reference to individuals, not groups of disciples.

Chapter 5

FOLLOWING A GOSPEL EXAMPLE

The example of the apostle Paul is a prime example of evangelistic gospel living. In fact, the Holy Spirit made a general statement concerning Paul’s behavior that should be the nature of our own evangelistic living. For example, on one occasion Paul left the city of Philippi and went over to the city of Thessalonica, “*where there was a synagogue of the Jews*” (At 17:1). And then Paul, “*as his custom was, went in to them*” (At 17:2).

Disputing brethren today would probably complain that Paul should not have gone into an assembly of those who were not of their particular fellowship. But he did because his purpose of life was evangelistic. At the time he went in among these unbelievers, the whole assembly was composed of religionists who followed the “Jews’ religion” (See

Gl 1:13). They were an assembly of people of faith, though misguided in reference to the Messiah.

We must note also that Paul did not just go to this assembly for a single visit. He went back every Saturday for three weeks (At 17:2). As long as leaders would allow him to talk to the assembly, he went back. When in Corinth “*he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath*” (At 18:4). He continued preaching the gospel to the Corinthian Jews until some “*resisted and blasphemed*” (At 18:6). The example is that we must always ask to preach in the assembly of any who have some faith, especially if they believe in Jesus. We must not forget that the gospel not only delivers us from sin, but also from the bondage of religion (Gl 5:1).

One thing that we have discovered is that all who believe in Jesus as the Son of God have a common belief in this matter of faith. If we preach the incarnate and crucified, resurrected, ascended and reigning King Jesus, then we have a common foundation for building unity upon this gospel message. There is so much to preach about the gospel that we have discovered that other groups will keep inviting us back in order to hear more about the gospel. On the other hand, if we preach a legal definition of our church heritage, then we set ourselves up to be in competition with the religious heritage of others. Competing heritages never arrive at unity. We must not confuse gospel with heritage, other than the fact that it is our heritage to preach only the gospel.

If it were Paul’s custom to enter only into the assemblies of the disciples, then he would never have stepped inside the assembly of those of another faith. The result of his preaching in the synagogue of Thessalonica was that “*some of them were persuaded and joined with Paul and Silas, a great multitude of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women*” (At 17:4). Now suppose that Paul and Silas never had enough courage to step outside their “church cocoon” in order to step inside the “Jews’ cocoon” on the Sabbath? How many thousands in the years afterward would have been lost as those first converts in Thessalonica would never have had the opportunity to hear, and then teach the gospel to their families? Cocooned disputers need to understand that they are working against the gospel when they criticize those

as Paul and Silas who are willing to step outside the cocoon of their fellowship in order to go with the gospel into other cocoons of faith where people are searching for a better understanding of the gospel.

It was Paul's custom to live according to the nature of the gospel. Since the gospel is good news that offers those in the bondage of religion the opportunity to live in the freedom of Christ, then it is inherent in the nature of the gospel that it be preached to all people of faith, regardless of who they are, or where they assemble. At least this was the common practice of the apostle Paul and other evangelists as they scattered throughout the first century (See At 8:4).

On another occasion during his ministry, Paul came into the city of Ephesus. Again, he went into the synagogue of Jewish religionists. He "*spoke boldly for three months*" (At 19:8). This was not a one-time effort for one Sabbath. He continued teaching in this assembly of unbelievers for a period of twelve weeks. He was there every Saturday "*reasoning and persuading*" concerning the gospel of the Messiahship and kingdom reign of Jesus (At 19:8). It sometimes takes time for those who are in the bondage of religion to understand the freedom that they can enjoy in Christ. We wonder where the disputing brethren were during this time when Paul showed up on the Sabbath in the synagogue of the Jews, and then on Sunday with the saints?

Would we dispute with Paul if he showed up in the assembly of another religious group on Sunday morning to preach the gospel, but did not assemble with those who already knew and had obeyed the gospel? Do the disputers have the right to restrain the evangelist from preaching the gospel to those who meet at the same time on Sunday morning as those who know and have obeyed the gospel? Would we ignore the pleas from another religious group to preach the gospel to their assemblies though they also meet at 10:00 Sunday morning?

We have discovered that there are some disputing brethren who are so legal oriented in their doctrine that they would judge Paul to be "forsaking the assembly" if he were to honor an invitation to preach the gospel on Sunday morning to another religious group. They would bar him from preaching the gospel to those who are searching in order that he stay with them for the "Sunday assembly." We might think that such

a situation would be an anomaly among us. But consider the fact that almost all the gospel preachers of the brotherhood throughout the world are preaching to their own brethren on Sunday morning while there are other people of faith among the religions of the world who are asking for someone to come and preach the gospel to them.

When Peter was at a love feast with Gentiles in Antioch, the false brethren who came up from Jerusalem, intimidated him from eating the love feast with the Gentiles on Sunday (See At 20:7). He stood condemned when he submitted to the intimidation of these false brethren. He and Barnabas subsequently turned away from the Gentiles, even though these Gentiles were brethren (Gl 2:11-13). Intimidation by false brethren to remain with a particular cocoon within the church is practiced among us even to this day.

Those false brethren who would accuse Paul and Peter of “forsaking the assembly” when they reached out to others must remember that they are false because they have threatened the freedom of both Paul and Peter (Gl 5:1). They, as Diotrophes who threatened gospel evangelists from coming to his group, have hindered the preaching of the gospel (See 3 Jn 9,10). They have added to the truth of the gospel their own self-righteous codes of legalized assemblies by which they would judge others. They have thus barred others from entering into their realm of supposed authority. Since Paul, Peter and John would enter into the assemblies of other religious groups in order to preach the gospel, these false brethren tagged them to be liberal teachers, and thus bar them from entering into their own sectarian assemblies.

We must also consider the two disciples, Aquila and Priscilla, who met for about a year in the Jewish synagogue in Ephesus before Paul returned to Ephesus after he had previously left the couple in the city (At 18:18,19). It was in this same synagogue that the two disciples had previously encountered Apollos (At 18:24-28). But what if Aquila and Priscilla had not followed the custom of Paul, and the other Jewish Christians of the time, to meet in the Jewish synagogues? If they had not taken this opportunity to meet with unbelievers in their religious assemblies, then we would certainly never have in the Scriptures the marvelous story of Apollos.

While in Ephesus, Paul “*reasoned daily in the school of Tyrannus*” (At 19:9). We would correctly assume that this school existed before Paul arrived in Ephesus. We would also correctly assume that this was not a brotherhood “school of preaching” or “Christian college.” It was possibly some “vocational school” to which everyone was invited to come from throughout Asia in order to study. Upon graduation, students returned to their homes in all Asia. At least Paul’s teaching in this “secular” school resulted in all Asia hearing the word of the gospel (At 19:10).

We can only imagine that if there were some brotherhood disputers in the church in Ephesus who argued that Paul should be preaching only in the “church cocoon,” thousands throughout Asia would never have heard the gospel. The fact that Paul was able to preach the gospel in the synagogues, and in the school of Tyrannus, is evidence that the church in Ephesus understood that the nature of the gospel was that it must be broadcast to all Asia.

And still while in Ephesus, Paul again lived the gospel by seeking to go into the house of worship of a particular religious group. At the time he was in the city, “*there arose a great disturbance concerning the Way*” (At 19:24). A certain businessman, Demetrius, rose up in order to bring accusations against the Christians who were influencing not only the Jewish community, but also the Greek community who worshiped other gods (At 19:24-28). As a result, all the worshipers of Artemis “*were full of wrath. And they cried out, saying, ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!’*” (At 19:28).

The religionists of the temple of Artemis (Gr. Diana) were zealous about their faith. But as Paul’s custom was with any religious assembly, he “*wanted to go into the assembly*” (At 19:30). At first the disciples of Ephesus “*did not allow him*” (At 19:30). They were fearful for his life. However, Paul may have been somewhat persistent in the matter. Therefore, “*some of the officials of Asia who were his friends sent to him, pleading with him that he not venture into the theater*” (At 19:30).

Our point is that Paul was not afraid to enter the assembly of any religious people, for each assembly was an opportunity to preach the

gospel. Even if he would endure possible bodily harm, he was still persistent to preach the gospel in hostile environments. His commitment to preach the gospel to religious people in any religious center came in the form of a rebuke to the disciples in Caesarea who tried to dissuade him from making a final visit to the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem. He said to the brethren, “*What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus*” (At 21:13). If he were to die for preaching the gospel, then it would be as a result of preaching the gospel to people of faith.

Our encouragement to those who want to go into temples, synagogues, cathedrals, or the church houses of any religious group, is to go. We must not allow false brethren to dissuade us from preaching the gospel to anyone who would invite us to come. But before one would go, he must first be able to separate the gospel from doctrine, especially the unique religious rites, rituals and ceremonies that identify his own religiosity. We have found that few religious people will object to the preaching of the simple gospel.

Chapter 6

GOSPEL SEMINAR IN ROME

We could use the word “aggressive” in reference to carrying out our responsibility to proclaim the gospel to the religious leaders who lead others in their faith. But if our temperament has not been fine-tuned by the gospel, then we may come across somewhat offensive, if not arrogant. However, love and deep-seated concern for the souls of people have a tendency to move us out of our cocoons of comfort, and correct our arrogance. When we love God because of His awesome love for us through His Son, it is then that we will always feel uncomfortable with ourselves until we say something about His love for us through Jesus. John worded it thus: “*We love because He first loved us*” (1 Jn 4:19).

We must assume that there are those who spiritually lead others also have a great thirst to better understand the gospel. However, they may not realize that they have a limited understanding of the gospel, or are teaching a twisted concept of the gospel. Or, they may be teaching the “other gospel” by attaching the traditions of their religious heritage to the gospel. If the leaders are the graduates of some Bible seminary, then we can be assured that they have a great deal of confidence in the framed diploma that hangs on their office wall. Therefore, they are unlikely to ask for any discussions concerning the gospel, or how to separate the good news from all the religious heritage they learned in an institutional Bible school. Nevertheless, if they do not ask for a discussion concerning the gospel, then we must take the initiative and ask them to come for a meeting that is directed toward gospel discussions. This is what Paul did when he first arrived in Rome as a prisoner for the gospel.

It is the nature of the good news to be preached to the world. Paul and most of the early Christians understood this. This nature has not changed. This means, therefore, that the message of the gospel must be preached in any assembly wherein there are those who seek to know the truth of the gospel. If one asks, and is accepted, then it is incumbent on those who know the gospel to preach to any group that desires to know more about the gospel. But if the religious leaders do not ask, then we must ask them to join with us in gospel discussions.

We live in a world where there is a great deal of confusion preached by those who have a distorted view of the gospel. We must keep in mind, therefore, that there are thousands of assemblies of religionists throughout the world that are opportunities as the Jewish synagogues of the first century. Those were assemblies of religious Jews who were waiting for the Messiah (Christ). They continued faithful in their cocoons, not knowing that the Messiah had already come in Jesus. In their weekly study of the Old Testament prophets, they had not connected all the dots that would lead them to understand that Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled every prophecy concerning Him being the Messiah (Lk 24:44,45).

As with the prophets who wrote the prophecies, the early Jews

also were not able to connect the gospel dots that were revealed (See 1 Pt 1:10-12). As the prophets, they could never have connected the gospel dots to discover the mystery of the gospel in the Old Testament. They could not because the revelation of the gospel mystery was not completely revealed until the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles on the Pentecost of A.D. 30.

When Paul arrived in Rome as a prisoner of the State, one of the first things he did was to call unbelieving Jewish leaders together for a “gospel seminar” (At 28:17). He called together Old Testament Bible students who could not connect the prophecies of the Messiah with Jesus of Nazareth. When the leaders came together, he first explained why he was in chains. He said, “***I have called for you, to see you and to speak with you, because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain***” (At 28:20). And then the inquisitive Jews stated, “***But we desire to hear from you what you think, for as concerning this sect [of Christians] we know that it is spoken against everywhere***” (At 28:22). We see in these religious leaders the studious spirit of the Bereans. The Bereans were considered noble by the Holy Spirit because they were Bible students (See At 17:11). Therefore, a special day of study was subsequently appointed for a seminar on the gospel. Luke recorded of this event,

*And when they had appointed him a day [for teaching], many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and testified of the kingdom of God, **persuading them concerning Jesus**, both out of the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning until evening. And some believed the things that were spoken and some did not believe (At 28:23,24).*

Our focus is on those who believed. If Paul had not conducted this gospel seminar, then how many people throughout history would have been lost?

Paul reasoned, and thus persuaded, because he had many years before stepped outside his own Jewish cocoon in order to help others connect the dots of the gospel. He and the early disciples were willing to go into any religious assembly in order to preach the gospel. If there were no assembly, then they were all willing to set up special assem-

blies for gospel teaching. If we are not willing to do this on a continuing basis today, then we do not understand the nature of the gospel, nor our responsibility as a disciple of Christ. We subsequently miss a tremendous opportunity for evangelism.

If we join the cocoon of disputers who criticize and intimidate those who want to preach the gospel outside their Sunday morning boxes, then we might find ourselves working against the gospel. But if we are willing to go to those who are seeking a better understanding of the gospel, then we might be surprised. There are, as in the Jewish synagogues of the first century, a great number of “Apollos” preachers there who are waiting for someone to come and explain to them “*the way of God more accurately*” (At 18:26). And once they know the gospel more accurately, then they in turn will go to others and do the same.

Chapter 7

MOVING THE GOSPEL BEYOND PROFESSIONALISM

There is a new religious world in which we live today that is somewhat different from the traditional religions that were predominant throughout the past. This is a world in which independent thinking people have, by the millions, moved away from the institutional traditional religions that were born out of the Reformation Movement five hundred years ago. It is in this world of independent religions that we have an opportunity to preach the simplicity of the gospel. In preaching the gospel to these groups, it is usually not necessary to penetrate five hundred years of heritage that preserved institutional traditional religions. It is our opportunity today, therefore, to approach those who have a more open mind. These are those religious groups who are not defending some traditional heritage.

However, one of the interesting phenomena about this new paradigm of independent religious leaders and churches is that most are obsessed with an urge on the part of the leaders of the movement to be

validated in their leadership. They are often obsessed with a desire to be validated in their leadership with some diploma or degree in Bible from a Bible school. Since most of these leaders left the heritage of their former traditional faiths, they covet a parallel professional validation as the leaders of the mainline churches they left. They thus seek some diploma or degree that indicates that they too have a right to preach. But their desire is often misguided.

We have had numerous calls from those who want some type of Bible diploma or degree in order that they too can be considered preachers. In fact, the calls almost always revolve around a distorted view of the caller having a right to be a preacher. Callers feel that they cannot preach the gospel unless they have some Bible diploma or degree, and preferably one that is awarded by some accredited Bible institution.

This validation is so strong among some leaders that they believe they do not have a right to preach the gospel unless they can hang a framed Bible diploma or degree on their office wall. We can understand this feeling because some governments of the continent on which we live will not register a group as a church if the preacher does not have a recognized diploma in Bible or religious ministry.

So the problem is that if one feels that he is not qualified to be a preacher without this piece of paper, then it is unlikely that he truly understands the gospel, and especially the responsibility that every disciple has in going forth to his own neighbors to preach the message of the gospel. Such desires for validation, therefore, are often soaked in professionalism, and subsequently become hindrances to the preaching of the gospel by every member of the body.

Nevertheless, we are not deceived by this obsession. At least on our continent among independent religions, those who desire an awarded validation to preach are often seeking to join the host of professional religious workers who bring the name of Jesus into disrepute among the unbelievers. These diploma seekers want to be one of the professional full-time preachers in the community in order to extract support from their subjected and often deceived constituents.

We have also discovered throughout a half century of contact with the “professionals” of various religious groups, that those who have

successfully acquired a validating degree from some educational institution are not that eager to discuss matters of the gospel. This is true, specifically of those who trust in a framed degree that hangs on their office wall. These “professionals” are often less inclined to discuss matters concerning the gospel of the incarnation of the Son of God, which incarnation must be emulated in our own lives (See Ph 2:5-8). In fact, the desire to be validated with a Bible diploma or degree by many religious leaders is contrary to the mind of Christ that must be reflected in our own incarnational living. Leaders often desire the degree in order to extract more money from supporters, but these misguided religious professionals are often as the Pharisees who loved money. This love of power and possessions is certainly contrary to the example that Paul left for all those who would live after the mind of Christ (See Ph 2:5-8).

Consider also the problem that such awards sometimes present a hindrance to the preaching of the gospel by the ordinary disciple. The “ordinary member” is often intimidated by the degree holder, thinking that he or she is less valuable in proclaiming the gospel than the professional degree holder. This is true because the diploma or degree from an accepted Bible institution of one’s traditional church is a signal of loyalty to that particular religious group, as well as an indication that one be exalted by the membership of the church to be a “scholar” in the word.

In order to be supported financially and exalted among the members, the degree holder often feels loyal to the accepted educational institution that is represented by the brotherhood of churches that support the accepted Bible school. Therefore, it is sometimes difficult for tentmakers, as Aquila and Priscilla, to discuss the gospel with a graduate from such a school.

On the other hand, if the graduate is instructed more accurately in the way of the Lord, then he might feel disloyal to his teachers who signed his diploma or degree if he changes his beliefs. Even if one personally grows in the grace and knowledge of the gospel through his own Bible study, this can be a problem (See 2 Pt 3:18). Any graduate FROM any Bible school must grow in the knowledge of the word of

God beyond his former instructors. If he or she does not, then his former instructors failed to inspire their students to study the Bible throughout their lives.

Chapter 8

MOVING THE GOSPEL BEYOND LEGAL RESTORATION

The result of the scenario of the previous chapter is that misunderstandings concerning the gospel are perpetuated through the Bible educational institutions of a particular network of churches. This was the great disservice of the Reformation Movement leaders five hundred years ago. In their flight from the constraints of Roman Catholicism, they ran from Catholic catechisms and power. But their primary focus was not to run to the gospel. They were more involved in theology, and less in gospel. In fact, they ran straight through Jerusalem and often established the very institutional religions as that from which they fled. The only thing that was different was some organizational restructuring and name changes. Theirs was mostly a religious political movement, not a true gospel restoration movement.

Those who later laid claim to restoration movements within the family of reformed churches, also ran into some problems. Legal restorations were generated in the nineteenth century in order to legally call confused religionists out of the quagmire of reformist religiosity. The problem with these movements was that the focus for restoration was more on law, and less on gospel.

A similar false security is true among many independent churches today. Though their “restoration” was not based on the theology of self-justification through meritorious law-keeping—they knew and know little Bible—another standard of justification was inadvertently established as groups violated the focus of Jesus that He taught in John 16:14: The Holy Spirit “*will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will declare it to you.*” The exaltation of the Holy Spirit over Jesus became the standard by which one was judged to be faithful, or one

judged others to be spiritual. This was the standard of a supposed direct influence of the Holy Spirit on the free-moral behavior of the individual. In this movement, self-justification shifted from law, or traditions, to one's own personal experience with the Holy Spirit, specifically in many cases, the manifestation of the Spirit through "tongue speaking." Contrary to the legal restorationist who focused on strict obedience to law, the experientialist secured his or her justification through some experience with the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, whether through a legal justification, or an experiential justification, both systems of religion are contrary to the justification that was unleashed from heaven through the atoning sacrifice of the Son of God on the cross. The gospel is simply contrary to both legal and experiential justification.

Legal restorationists had an inherent problem within their movements. In seeking to establish a legally defined church, focus was diverted from the primary importance of the message of the gospel. Therefore, in their debates over what laws were binding in order to be justified as the true church, the debaters often ended up splintering over numerous opinions and creeds that they assumed must be meritoriously performed correctly by individuals in order to be justified before God. When any group of the movement eventually settled on a common opinion or creed that would be recognized and obeyed by the majority of the movement, then they too established their own Bible educational institutions that would perpetuate their common creed.

In legal restorations, gospel always becomes obscure in the quagmire of opinions and creeds, and thus falls away from being the primary foundation for unity, and the first message to be preached to the unbelievers. In fact, the gospel is often relegated to a legal system of law that must be meritoriously obeyed in order for one to justify himself before God. One could preach this message of self-justification, pointing out all the right scriptures for the laws to be obeyed, but never focus on the incarnation of the Son of God, His atoning sacrifice, and His present gospel kingdom reign over all things, which reign includes the continued submission of the members as the body of Christ. In this movement, the preachers often ended up preaching more church than gospel. They thus reversed the order of importance. It is paramount to

understand the church of our Lord, but it is absolutely imperative that we first understand and preach the gospel of Christ upon whom the church of Christ is founded.

In the midst of all this religious diversity, and in their efforts to set themselves apart from the religious world, many of the present leaders of the independent church movements around the world have developed some unfortunate motives for acquiring a diploma or degree in Bible in order to perpetuate their movements. As previously stated, they seek validation for their assumed positions in order that they too can be considered to be on the same theological level as their counterparts in the traditional churches from which they supposedly restored Christianity. They often feel that they are not valid preachers unless they have some official award from a recognized, if not government accredited, Bible training institution.

But there is often an inherent error in the motives and reasoning of degree-seeking religionists. Many zealous leaders are often seeking an award in law, not gospel. They are often motivated to study the Bible in order to acquire some degree in the law of the word of God, but not a better understanding of the revelation of the gospel through the word of God. If the law is learned in every detail, then it is assumed that one will be better prepared to defend the church. In such an intellectual quest, one's understanding of the gospel often becomes a subpoint on an outline of law. For example, as stated previously, established and often opinionated "laws concerning the Lord's Supper" become more important than the gospel of which the Supper is to remind us. Legal restorationists will always quibble over their supposed "laws" in partaking of the Supper, with the subject of the gospel moved into the background of the discussion.

A legal restorationist who has become a religionist is easily betrayed by his own contentions. The religionist argues over whether to serve the fruit of the vine with one cup or several cups. The gospel restorationist, on the other hand, could care less how many cups are used. His focus is not on the cup, or cups, but on the incarnational offering of the Son of God on the cross for his redemption. The obsession of his concern is Christ, not cups.

Chapter 9

MOVING THE GOSPEL BEYOND DEGREES

But we need to be straightforward about this matter. Institutional Bible schools are often established with the goal of perpetuating a legal restoration. This is accomplished by cloning the graduates after the legal identity of the churches who recommend the schools. **But we must remember that it does not take years of full-time Bible study to learn the simple gospel message.** The fact that some churches demand that one have a Bible diploma or degree before they can stand before a group of people and preach is a testimony to the fact that those who make such a demand do not themselves understand the centrality of the gospel to our total beliefs and behavior as Christians. At least they have not been able to separate gospel from law. And in many cases, they cannot separate preaching the gospel from religious professionalism. Bible schools are great for learning the Bible, but they must not be entered in order to become a lawyer of the Bible, or a professional religious worker.

If one does eventually yield to the pressure to validate his right to preach with a Bible diploma or degree, then after the required years of full-time study he sometimes goes forth with a degree in theology and law, with little emphasis on the gospel. Throughout his many years of study in theology and law, these two subjects became more important than gospel. Upon graduation, therefore, he is eager to debate and defend his theology, but he may not know enough gospel to be able to separate law and gospel in his Bible discussions.

Some churches demand that their preachers study as long as six years in a theological seminary before they are “licensed” to preach to the churches of their fellowship. We have found, however, that these graduates have studied a great deal of theology, some Bible, but little gospel. Nevertheless, they are qualified to supposedly lead the people. And they do professionally lead, but they do so as professional religionists.

It might be good to close with a brief reminder, if not challenge, for those who believe that they are not valid preachers of the gospel unless they are officially schooled in the “profession” of preaching. Those who are obsessing over some type of validation in order to preach must again consider Apollos (See At 18:24-28). This zealous young man set out from Alexandria, Egypt with the love of God in his heart. He was “*an eloquent man and mighty in the [Old Testament] Scriptures*” (At 18:24). But he had no New Testament. He had little, if any, firsthand knowledge of Jesus. All he knew was that John the Baptist had showed up by the Jordan River and was baptizing people in preparation for the coming Messiah. That was enough for Apollos to go forth and preach what he knew from the Old Testament.

But eventually, Apollos encountered two Christians sitting in a Jewish synagogue in Ephesus. Now those who thirst after some Bible diploma and degree before they feel that they are professionally qualified to preach the gospel, need to follow closely the example of Apollos. Apollos encountered Aquila and Priscilla in the synagogue in Ephesus. In that synagogue, Apollos “*spoke and taught diligently the things of the Lord*” (At 18:25). He preached what he knew, though some of that which he knew was incorrect. Nevertheless, he went forth from Alexandria and preached regardless of his lack of knowledge of the whole gospel itself. When the two Christians in Ephesus realized that he needed more information on the gospel than what John the Baptist had given, “*they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately*” (At 18:26).

After this brief classroom session on the gospel with Aquila and Priscilla, notice carefully the Holy Spirit’s historical statement concerning what happened next in the life of Apollos:

And when he [Apollos] desired to go to Achaia, the brethren [in Ephesus] encouraged him and wrote the disciples [in Achaia] to receive him. And when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace (At 18:27).

It is interesting to note that **the brethren in Ephesus did not hinder**

Apollos from going forth until he had first graduated from some Bible school in order to be validated as an “official” preacher of the gospel. Neither did they send him off somewhere to Bible school. Neither could Aquila or Priscilla lay hands on him in order that he receive, as Timothy and Titus, the miraculous gift of inspired teaching (See At 8:18). After his teaching by the husband and wife team, Aquila and Priscilla, the brethren in Ephesus knew that Apollos knew the whole gospel of grace. With that simple knowledge of the gospel, they realized that he could encourage everyone to whom he went. So they immediately sent him forth with a full understanding of the gospel message.

The point is that if one knows the gospel, then he is validated to be a proclaimer of the gospel. There is no professionalism involved. This would be characteristic of ordinary people as Peter and John when they stood before the highly educated Jewish leaders of Judaism:

*Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and perceived that **they were uneducated and ordinary men**, they marveled. And they took note that they had been with Jesus (At 4:13).*

It simply does not take several years in a Bible school in order to learn the simplicity of the message of the gospel. Apollos had two instructors for a brief time in Ephesus, and then he was so qualified with the message that the brotherhood in Ephesus had enough confidence in his knowledge of the gospel to support him as an evangelist to Achaia. The Ephesian brethren did not even give to Apollos a “study Bible” when they sent him on his way. He did not even receive a printed New Testament, for at the time no New Testament books were written. He had no diploma to present to the brethren in Corinth. All he had was the gospel and a knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Now compare this scenario with the institutional religions of today. Such institutional religions have moved so far into religious professionalism that it seems that they will never recover. We are so engulfed in a quagmire of religious professionalism that sincere people are intimidated to feel they are not qualified to preach the gospel unless

they are a graduate from some corporate Bible school. Even worse, some feel that if they do go to a Bible school, then that school must be accredited by some pagan government. We are further removed from the simplicity of New Testament Christianity than we think.

It is interesting that the brethren in Ephesus wrote a letter for Apollos to present to the brethren in Corinth. Because Apollos had received instructions from Aquila and Priscilla, the brethren stated in the letter that they should receive Apollos (At 18:27). Therefore, upon his arrival in Corinth, the Corinthian brethren were presented with a letter, not an accredited Bible school diploma or degree. The result was that in Corinth, Apollos “*powerfully refuted the Jews publicly, showing by the [Old Testament] Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ [Messiah]*” (At 18:28). When Aquila and Priscilla connected all the dots of prophecy to Jesus of Nazareth, Apollos was able to preach the power of the gospel. He needed no Bible diploma or degree to do this.

Another example of this would be even more fitting to prove our point on this matter, as well as remind ourselves that we are presently stuck in a religiosity that is hindering the preaching of the gospel to the world. Two thousand years ago, a preacher of the gospel once met a government official on the road that went through the desert between Jerusalem to Gaza. The government official, as Apollos, knew the Old Testament. However, he was confused concerning the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53. When the desert preacher asked him, “*Do you understand what you are reading?*”, the official replied, “*How can I, except someone guides me?*” (At 8:30,31). And with that response, Bible class was open, but only for a brief time.

The Bible class was opened when the desert preacher “*opened his mouth, and beginning at this scripture [of Isaiah 53] he preached Jesus to him*” (At 8:35). The Bible class did not go on for years. It went on long enough for a response to come from the official in reference to his obedience to the gospel that Philip preached. The official said to the preacher, “*I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God*” (At 8:37). And then graduation occurred. The government official “*commanded the chariot to stand still. And they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him*” (At 8:38).

Now notice the conclusion to the whole story: After graduation, the Holy Spirit first extracted Philip out of the desert classroom and sent him off to teach in Azotus (At 8:40). Philip did not even have a chance to write a letter of recommendation for the eunuch as the Ephesian brethren did for Apollos. However, doing so would have given the pretense of one preacher passing on to another a supposed “evangelistic authority,” which thing is nowhere taught in the Scriptures.

With class over, the eunuch simply went on his way back to Africa, rejoicing all the way (At 8:39). Also, Philip did not give him a “study Bible” in order that he know and preach the gospel. All he had was the brief explanation that Philip gave in connecting all the gospel dots between the Old Testament prophecies and Jesus as the Messiah and Savior of the world. Neither, might we add, did Philip send the eunuch off to Bible school in order to be validated with a diploma or degree to be a preacher of the gospel. We only know that the eunuch had in his hand the Old Testament Scriptures. He had no New Testament Scriptures, for none were written at the time. Once the dots of the Old Testament Scriptures were connected to Jesus of Nazareth, the eunuch understood the gospel. So off he went to preach this gospel to Africa.

Though Bible schools are good in offering studies in the word of God and student fellowship, we must not forget that they have their limitations. Because we have become so engulfed in religious professionalism, Bible schools have often become a hindrance to the natural flow of the gospel going into all the world by those as Apollos and the eunuch.

Chapter 10

MOVING THE GOSPEL BEYOND CORPORATE EDUCATION

A good illustration of our present predicament in these times would prove our point. For example, it is sometimes the case that when a

Bible student in these days of the institutional church seeks to go into all the world as a missionary, supporting churches require that the would-be missionary receive a degree in missions from some accepted school that offers a degree in “missiology”—the word itself even sounds professional. In order to receive this degree in missions, the student must go into financial debt for thousands of dollars that he has received from a government student loan. Graduated students from all secular educational institutions across America now owe more than two trillion dollars in student loans. This is all because of the corporate educational establishment of America. This is the case with secular educated graduates, but also with those who have graduated from an institutional Bible school.

Once the corporate educational institution has received its tuition of borrowed government money from the student, and then handed the student a piece of paper with a “degree” stamped on it, the educational corporation has its money and is happy. The student then goes forth after graduation with a debt that often takes ten years to pay back to the government. In reference to those who graduate with a degree in missions, the student does not enter the business world in order to pay back his debt of thousands of dollars. As a marginally supported evangelist, his family simply suffers until the debt is paid. Nevertheless, after graduation, the student debt is no longer the concern of the corporate Bible educational institution. Their corporate institution of education has received the tuition money, and the graduate walks away with a decade of government debt hanging over his head.

We have heard of more than one student asking a possible supporting church to help him pay off his debt in order to be sent forth as a missionary to preach the gospel. If the church is not willing, then usually the hopeful missionary simply does not go into all the world to preach the gospel. There is something wrong with this picture. Nevertheless, this is true in many cases because so many institutional churches now require a degree in missions from a corporate educational Bible institution before they will send the graduated student into all the world in order to preach the gospel.

The coronavirus that has plagued the world may change our attitudes concerning the supposed necessity of corporate education in a

classroom. Throughout the lockdown to control the virus, schools have closed and universities have been shut down. Thousands of students have been sent back home and moved into their bedroom classrooms. The Internet has now become the medium of bringing education to the student, instead of sending the student off to the classroom of some corporate educational institution.

The world is discovering what Elon Musk, the CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, discovered years ago. After graduating from other schools, he determined that he had set long enough in a classroom. So he spent only two days in a classroom at Stanford University before he walked out. He reasoned, “Why am I sitting here listening to this teacher when I could get the same information in a book.” So Musk dropped out of Stanford, bought the books, and then educated himself in all that he needed to know about any subject. In 1999 he founded X.com, which later became PayPal. In 2002 he founded SpaceX, and in 2003 he founded the electric Tesla car company. Christians need to remember this example. In order to preach the gospel, all that is needed is a knowledge of one Book. Spend some time in study of this Book and one will be qualified to preach the gospel. No professional classrooms needed.

If every disciple did this, then there would be a system of mutual checks and balances in reference to conclusions that each member draws from his or her personal studies. But when we send one of our number off to a Bible school, we are tempted to submit to the graduates personal conclusions when he frames and hangs his Bible diploma on the wall of our classroom.

The Holy Spirit knew that all we needed was a Book. If we love the word of God, then we will personally study the Book. For two thousand years, the Spirit has depended on this system of Bible education. As long as one has the Book of all the gospel prophecies and fulfillments that connect all the prophecies to Jesus, then one can learn the gospel message and go forth to preach the gospel. No Bible diplomas or degrees needed.

Today, if one has a computer, he or she has access to thousands of books that have been written on any Bible subject. One can receive in the bedroom classroom studies in any Bible subject that one can imag-

ine. In these times of school closings, people are learning, as Musk, that paying thousands of dollars in tuition to a corporate educational institution is not necessary, especially in reference to studying the Bible. Every church of Christians should be an educational medium through which every member can have in-depth studies in the word of God. This was the way it was by the end of the first century. It is the way it should be today.

But we must be clear on this point. In the secular world the guarantee that one is qualified for a particular work for which he is hired is a degree in studies that relate to that work. But in reference to gospel matters, it is the degree by which one lives the gospel that qualifies him for the work of the ministry. The faithful worker for the Lord has his or her entire life to study the Book. There will be only one graduation for the faithful. Death will terminate our studies on earth, and the graduation ceremony will take place on the last day when the Teacher says, *“Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”* (Mt 25:34).

The preceding thoughts compose the picture that we read in Acts 8:4: *“Those who were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word.”* When we speak of gospel restoration, we must not rely on the corporate educational system, as well as the corporate church that depends too much on such in order to provide those who would go forth to preach the gospel. These institutions often hinder the preaching of the gospel, especially in the underdeveloped world. It is corporate institutional churchianity at its best when we allow only the professionals who have Bible diplomas and degrees to be our “official” representatives to preach the gospel. It is a system of religion that Satan has done well in preparing throughout the last century in order to greatly limit the preaching of the gospel to all the world in this century. Preachers in the developing world need to base their confidence on the gospel, not on a Bible diploma or degree from some Bible school. The gospel-living disciple who has only one Book often knows more about the gospel than the Bible degree graduate from a corporate Bible educational institution.

Other books by Roger E. Dickson
Download free from The Biblical Research Library,
www.africainternational.org

- Book 1: *Introduction To The Bible*
 Book 2: *Biblical Interpretation*
 Book 3: *Sovereignty Of Deity*
 Book 4: *The Seedline Promise*
 Book 5: *Finding The Priceless Pearl*
 Book 6: *Law And Covenants*
 Book 7: *The Gospel Covenant*
 Book 8: *The Gospel World View*
 Book 9: *The Gospel Reign Of The Son Of God*
 Book 10: *The Judgments Of God*
 Book 11: *The Church In Eternity*
 Book 12: *God The Father*
 Book 13: *God The Son*
 Book 14: *God The Holy Spirit*
 Book 15: *The Promise Of The Holy Spirit*
 Book 16: *The Holy Spirit And The Early Church*
 Book 17: *The Holy Spirit And The Church Today*
 Book 18: *Satan And Demons*
 Book 19: *Gospel Leadership*
 Book 20: *Equipping The Saints*
 Book 21: *Developing Character*
 Book 22: *The Function Of Discipleship*
 Book 23: *Gospel Evangelism*
 Book 24: *Authentic Church*
 Book 25: *The Existence Of God*
 Book 26: *The Bible And Science*
 Book 27: *The Bible And Faith*
 Book 28: *Luke's Historical Defense Of Christianity*
 Book 29: *Sectarian Denominationalism*
 Book 30: *Roman Catholicism*
 Book 31: *Justified By Works*
 Book 32: *Making Disciples In A Global Community*
 Book 33: *21st Century Restoration*
 Book 34: *Restoration!*
 Book 35: *Worship God*
 Book 36: *Worship Freely*
 Book 37: *One Lord With All Authority Over All Things*
 Book 38: *The Christ-Centered Faith*
 Book 39: *The Lord's Supper*
 Book 40: *Fundamental Messages*
 Book 41: *Obedience To The Gospel*
 Book 42: *The Music Of The Church*
 Book 43: *Exercising Sobriety And Self-Control*
 Book 44: *Experiential Religion Versus Word-Based Faith*
 Book 45: *Grace Response Versus Tithing By Law*
 Book 46: *The Religious Sectarian*
 Book 47: *Fellowship And Unity Of The Organic Body*
 Book 48: *The Cross-Centered Faith*
 Book 49: *Escape From Bondage*
 Book 50: *Perceptions And Postulations*
 Book 51: *Our Faith – Our Salvation*
 Book 52: *His Grace – Our Faith*
 Book 53: *The Living Sacrifice*
 Book 54: *Committed To World Evangelism*
 Book 55: *Organic Function Of The Body Of Christ*
 Book 56: *The World As It Is*
 Book 57: *The Godly Giver*
 Book 58: *Thirsting For Word From God*
 Book 59: *Following Jesus Into Glory*
 Book 60: *The Seven Flickering Flames Of Asia*
 Book 61: *The Giants Among Us*
 Book 62: *Dead Preachers*
 Book 63: *New Creation*
 Book 64: *Character For Christ*
 Book 65: *The Power Of Many As One*
 Book 66: *The Last High Priest*
 Book 67: *Survivors*
 Book 68: *Change For Growth*
 Book 69: *Building Eternal Relationships*
 Book 70: *Inscriptions I: Living The Word Of God*
 Book 71: *Disciples Of Divinity*
 Book 72: *Fasting*
 Book 73: *The Gospel Of God's Heart*
 Book 74: *Inscriptions II: Implementing Gospel Living*
 Book 75: *It's All About Jesus*
 Book 76: *Escape From Religion*
 Book 77: *Rise And Fall Of Civilizations*
 Book 78: *In Search Of The First Love*
 Book 79: *Gospel Restoration*
 Book 80: *Solutions To The Problem*
 Book 81: *Tethered To Christ Through The Gospel*
 Book 82: *The Gospel According To Hebrews*
 Book 83: *Gospel Teacher*
 Book 84: *Gospel Teacher In Times Of Turmoil*
 Book 85: *The Incarnational Journey Of God*
 Book 86: *Angels*
 Book 87: *Beginner's Road Map For Gospel Living Into Eternal Life*
 Book 88: *Inscriptions III: Just Saying*
 Book 89: *Your Gospel Journey With The Son Of God*
 Book 90: *The Incredible Mystery*
 Book 91: *Inscriptions IV: Finding Our Way Back*
 Book 92: *Releasing The Gospel*
 Book 93: *A Certain Destiny*
 Book 94: *Latin America Odyssey*
 Book 95: *African Odyssey*
 Book 96: *African Literature Odyssey*

Plus commentaries on all the books of the Bible in the
Dickson Teacher's Bible, at www.africainternational.org

ABBREVIATIONS

OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis - **Gn**, Exodus - **Ex**, Leviticus - **Lv**, Numbers - **Nm**, Deuteronomy - **Dt**, Joshua - **Ja**, Judges - **Jg**, Ruth - **Rt**, 1 Samuel - **1 Sm**, 2 Samuel - **2 Sm**, 1 Kings - **1 Kg**, 2 Kings - **2 Kg**, 1 Chronicles - **1 Ch**, 2 Chronicles - **2 Ch**, Ezra - **Er**, Nehemiah - **Ne**, Esther - **Et**, Job - **Jb**, Psalms - **Ps**, Proverbs - **Pv**, Ecclesiastes - **Ec**, Song of Solomon - **Ss**, Isaiah - **Is**, Jeremiah - **Jr**, Lamentations - **Lm**, Ezekiel - **Ez**, Daniel - **Dn**, Hosea - **Hs**, Joel - **Jl**, Amos - **Am**, Obadiah - **Ob**, Jonah - **Jh**, Micah - **Mc**, Nahum - **Nh**, Habakkuk - **Hk**, Zephaniah - **Zp**, Haggai - **Hg**, Zechariah - **Zc**, Malachi - **Ml**

NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew - **Mt**, Mark - **Mk**, Luke - **Lk**, John - **Jn**, Acts - **At**, Romans - **Rm**, 1 Corinthians - **1 Co**, 2 Corinthians - **2 Co**, Galatians - **Gl**, Ephesians - **Ep**, Philippians - **Ph**, Colossians - **Cl**, 1 Thessalonians - **1 Th**, 2 Thessalonians - **2 Th**, 1 Timothy - **1 Tm**, 2 Timothy - **2 Tm**, Titus - **Ti**, Philemon - **Pl**, Hebrews - **Hb**, James - **Js**, 1 Peter - **1 Pt**, 2 Peter - **2 Pt**, 1 John - **1 Jn**, 2 John - **2 Jn**, 3 John - **3 Jn**, Jude - **Jd**, Revelation - **Rv**