

THE AUSTRALIAN ANABAPTIST

God's solid foundation stands firm. 2 Timothy 2:19

Vol. 17 No. 6 – JUNE 2020



Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel,
but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in
the house.

Matthew 5:15

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For A Conservative Anabaptist Perspective

From The Editor's Desk**To Whom Does God's Kingdom Belong?**

When Jesus launched His Sermon on the Mount the first words of the Lord were: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

It is not the proud, it is not the greedy of distinction, it is not those who gather and hoard, not those who lay down the law to their neighbors, not those that condescend, any more than those that shrug the shoulder, that have any share in the kingdom of the Father. His kingdom has no relation with or resemblance to the kingdoms of this world.

It deals with not one thing that distinguishes their rulers, except to repudiate them.

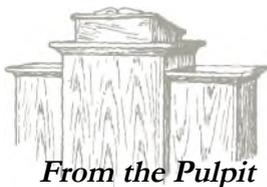
The Son of God will favor no smallest ambition, even if it be in the heart of him who leans on his bosom. The kingdom of God, the refuge of the oppressed, the golden age of the new world, the real utopia, the newest yet oldest Atlantis, the home of the children, will not open its gates to the most miserable whose aim it is to rise above his equal in misery, who looks down on any one more miserable than himself.

The kingdom of God is the home of perfect brotherhood. The poor, the beggars in spirit, the men of humble heart, the unambitious for selfish gain, the unselfish, those who never despise men and never seek their praises, the lowly who see nothing to admire in themselves and therefore who cannot seek to be admired of others, the men who give themselves and what they have away—these are the free men of the kingdom, these are the citizens of the new Jerusalem.

The men and women who are aware of their own essential poverty are the ones of whom Jesus spoke. Not those who are poor in friends, poor in influence, poor in acquirements, poor in money, but those who are poor "in spirit"—who feel themselves poor creatures—upon them the blessing rests. Those who know nothing for which to be pleased with themselves for, and desire nothing to make them think well of themselves, who know that they need little to make their life worth living, to make their existence a good thing, to make them fit to live—these humble ones are the poor whom the Lord calls blessed.

When a man says, "I am low and unworthy," then the gate of the kingdom begins to open to him."

Used by permission from "Knowing the Heart of God" George MacDonald edited by Michael R. Phillips.



The Rise of Anabaptism – Part 2

Melvin Burkholder

Editor's Note: Briefly last month Part 1 towards the end stated that Christendom technically in the old days was a state church set up but the New Testament Church is the ecclesia, the called out ones, God calls, "Come out of her my people, wherefore come out from among them and be ye separate saith the Lord and I will receive you." 2 Corinthians 6:17.

In this concluding part of the message the emphasis is more on the Reformation and post-reformation period.

In the Reformation era both Catholics and Reformers built societies based upon this pre-Christian model of church and state united in a sacral society, which meant that if your ruler was Catholic you were a Catholic, if he was Lutheran you were a Lutheran, and when Catholics and Lutherans battled for your region you might change from Catholic to Lutheran back to Catholic, back to Lutheran several times as armies advanced and retreated. (*In England, especially from King Henry VIII on, the compulsory religion for the people changed a number of times between Roman Catholic, Church of England and Protestantism - Cromwell for example.*)

Now one of the reasons the Reformers reached back into the Old Testament so much for their practices and doctrines was that they were building a pre-Christian society with the church and state as one entity.

In the Old Testament circumcision brought babies into the state, (Israel), babies born in a country into the state mandated religious society (church), people said we will bring babies into the church by baptism which corresponded to circumcision in their view.

In such a society Jesus' teaching of nonresistance is an impossible ideal, it doesn't make sense, I mean it's impractical, it must mean it is only for some people like just the monks or just the clergy or for some future time maybe, it doesn't make sense.

And oath swearing likewise, the provision of oath swearing, you have to

have it for a political religious society or any political society and so if the political and religious societies are one then you have that oath swearing, you cannot give it up, and so the Sermon on the Mount with the direct teachings and example of Jesus Christ were swept aside, they did not know what to do with them in a society where church and state were one, they just did not know what to do with them.

The Anabaptists had an answer, a radical answer.

And I use radical in its entomological meaning and that means getting to the root of it, it comes from "radicalis" or root of, and they said get down to the root of the matter, uproot that old idea of a unified church and state and build a New Testament church on New Testament principles and I think when we look at their answer you can see why both Reformers and Catholics feared the Anabaptists as revolutionaries and felt they must exterminate them.

And I think we can see also why they continually accused them of attempting to overthrow government.

And the Anabaptist said: We are not trying to overthrow governments, we are not political revolutionaries, we are respectful, we pray, we pay, we obey but we are going to build upon New Testament principles and let the chips fall where they will and if this means the world is turned upside down or right side up, why so be it!

That was the Anabaptist view – we are building a New Testament church.

Now today when you say this in many countries the Anabaptists ideals of freedom of conscience and of voluntary church in a pluralistic society seems normal, it is the status quo but even today we would not need to travel very far before the old model makes itself felt again.

Not long after the birth of the Mennonite church in January 1525 the Anabaptist met to set forth in writing the New Testament principles guiding their movement and the result was the Schleitheim Confession of 1527 written by Michael Sattler and others, seven articles each directed toward the formation of a church based upon New Testament principles, in each of those articles is a key position of the Anabaptists and I would just now like to follow with key position six here to follow the articles of the Schleitheim Confession. *(See Footnote 1)*

6]. Key position six: Believers baptism.

To the Reformers baptism meant little, it was not very important, it was a secondary thing in their categorizing of ethics, ethical categorizing, it was something done to babies to bring them into the church.

To the Anabaptists baptism was very important, it was a believer's baptism, you have been washed and made new, whosoever believeth and is baptised shall be saved. It is for adults, not for babies because babies cannot believe they told Reformers. And Luther said: Oh yes, babies can believe, babies can have latent faith, it is there but you cannot see it, it comes out later.

How do you know it is there?

Well you just take my word for it, it is there, said Luther.

Oh yes, Calvin said, babies have partial faith.

Well how do you know?

Well take my word for it.

Zwingli said, O well babies have parental faith, the parents have faith for the babies and this kind of thing.

And the Anabaptist said: Show it to me in the New Testament.

The New Testament says believers are to be baptized and that's really where it is, and this was very, very important to the Anabaptists, this was the rite by which they were brought into the visible body of Christ.

That whole thing of visible and invisible is another discussion that we are not going to go into but this is very important to the Anabaptists and of course they insisted that infant baptism did not mean anything and therefore they were called rebaptisers, Anabaptists. We think if somebody calls me an Anabaptist I think, that's nice, I will take that mantle, I'll wear it, I'll be happy with that, keep my chin up but back then that was a term of disgust to be called Anabaptists, you are part of the rabble, part of the people that were not fit to walk the earth, were not fit to live at all.

So that is the first article of the Schleithem Confession: Believers' Baptism. And that is how they define themselves and interestingly enough that is that the name their enemies gave to them – rebaptisers.

7]. Key position number seven the second article of the Schleithem Con-

fession is “Church Discipline” or Church Standards.

And this is based largely on Matthew 18, the binding and the loosing, and the Anabaptist said it is necessary to the New Testament church and you see it in the New Testament that it is not just Matthew 18, it is 1 Corinthians 5, and there are references in various places in the epistles that make it clear that the church is a disciplined body, and that the exercise of discipline is necessary for the purity of the church.

Now the Reformers and the Catholics just did not see how to exercise church discipline in a sacral society (State church) because to put a member out of the church you had to put him out of society because the church and society were coextensive. (*existing as one unit*)

How do you put a person out of society? Well you stick them in jail. That was one of the forces of church discipline or you exile him, you tell him he must leave this society or you take his head off or you burn him or something like that, that's church discipline under a sacral system.

We today of course in American Anabaptist circles have New Testament church discipline but very few other churches practice church discipline as the second article of the Schleitheim Confession directs or as the New Testament teaches it and the Anabaptists practiced it and we should not be intimidated because not many do, we should keep on doing it because it is scriptural, it is Bible, it fits into our heritage and it is very important to have a pure church of Jesus Christ.

8]. Key position eight, the third article of the Schleitheim Confession, the Breaking of Bread in Close Communion.

The Anabaptists said this: All who wish to break bread together must beforehand be united in the one body of Christ by baptism, the congregation, by baptism.

And to the Anabaptists you see the communion was a symbolic event of brotherhood, they made a lot of the symbolism of Christ's death but they also made a lot of the symbolism in 1 Corinthians 10 where the grain was ground to make the loaf and we are one loaf and it symbolizes brotherhood, and that is a very Anabaptist concept.

Most churches don't make much of that as I understand it, certainly the Reformers and Catholics would not have.

The Catholics and Reformers by way of contrast said communion or mass, or whatever they call it, is a sacrament, it is a means of bringing grace to the unconverted unwashed masses of Christendom and thus they had all kinds of arguments about how is this done and how to bring grace to the masses of these people that they would then somehow get them into heaven and some said, the Catholics said, the priest actually remakes or when the priest elevates the host and pronounces the proper words the host or the bread is actually changed into that literal body of Jesus Christ (*transubstantiation*) and so they are actually partaking of Jesus Christ literally and Jesus said: If you take my body that is going to bring life to you.

And so this is the way to bring life to these unconverted masses.

Luther said, he believed in that grace came through sacraments too, but transubstantiation was a little too hard for him and so he said, Well maybe the priest isn't really changing it, he is not really changing it but the presence of Christ is everywhere and so it is in the bread too.

That is consubstantiation.

And I think if you take that logically you can apply that to the turkey dinner too for that matter but I don't really see how that fits.

But one interesting point that I came across in "The Reformers and Their Stepchildren" by Leonard Verduin, a number of years ago was that as the priest elevates the host he said words in Latin, the common people did not understand Latin and did not really understand what was being pronounced.

Well the arguments about transubstantiation and consubstantiation and all of that the Anabaptists just swept that aside, they didn't even discuss it in their Confession, they didn't even talk about it because what was important to them was that we are brethren in close communion, the communion table is limited to such brethren, we exercise Matthew 18 to keep the body pure so that we can be one loaf and then we come together as brethren, commemorating the work of Jesus Christ on behalf of the body and that is what communion meant to them and it was not all this about grace and making people pure and all that kind of thing.

And again very few churches practice close communion in this Anabaptist New Testament sense where you bind and you loose, where you keep the body pure and you have counsel services and use Matthew 18 to solve and resolve problems and you keep together so you can have one loaf and then you sit down and you take the elements in representation and commemoration of what Jesus Christ did for us.

And that is the New Testament attitude about the breaking of bread in close communion and it is a very important Anabaptist position and it is that important to us today too.

9]. Key position number nine also from the Schleithem Confession. Separation from evil or the world and unscriptural churches, they are both there I think in the Schleithem.

The Anabaptists were not ecumenical relativists who Christianized their opponents; they were absolutists who denounced evil and called for separation and withdrawal.

The Reformers wanted the Anabaptist to join and they said, Love, love, love, are you forgetting love?

Zwingli said: Whether or not you have the Scriptures on your side these things should be decided by love!

Does that sound familiar? I think so.

And the Anabaptists were not against love but they were not going to use love as an excuse to compromise with wrongdoing and wrong doctrine and this is a very necessary understanding for us in our relativistic, pluralistic religious society where doctrine no longer counts and tolerance is the highest virtue.

And I think it even touches us a little sometimes today when people are more and more afraid of saying: "Well this is an un-Christian practice or an un-Christian idea" and thus they are Christianizing unscriptural behaviour and giving the name Christian to whomever wants the name.

That touches us just a little bit and I don't think we should do either one, I think we should leave the judgment of those without in the hands of God as 1 Corinthians 5 instructs us to do but by all means let's not start this inclusive relativistic idea of embracing whoever calls themselves a Christian.

That is not biblical and it is not Anabaptist either.

10]. Key Anabaptist position number 10 is on Church Leadership.

The Anabaptists, if you read the Schleithem Confession, it is clear that they did not believe in a professional leadership, it was non-professional leadership. (*Unpaid, no salary*)

The Reformers, their church leaders, worked hand in glove with civil rulers, and they received a wage for doing it, they were either trained professionals or else put into a professional position, today they are mostly trained professionals and today of course some of the Anabaptists are taking the reformed approach by having professional leaders, professional clergy. (*See Footnote 2*)

But the Anabaptist approach was to say, and you can see it in their confession way back from 1527, what was important is that leaders meet the Bible qualifications, that is the important thing, not how educated they are, not that they are authorized by the church or authorized by the state not that they stand in some apostolic succession or something like that but that they meet the qualifications of the New Testament.

Among the Catholics and the Reformers many of the clergy were admittedly wicked men, not all, but many were, even a man like Zwingli had a concubine. And how did they deal with that? I mean they knew, I said they were admittedly wicked men, and the Reformers admitted it, it is not that other people accused them of it and they denied, no, they admitted it. How did they defend that?

Well Luther said something like this; Even if Judas and Caiaphas or Pilate served the sacraments it makes no difference, they still make the participants holy, it does not matter who does the serving, it makes no difference, it doesn't matter who does the preaching if what is true is preached, it makes no difference.

That is confusion brethren, that is error, it is certainly not Scripture, it is certainly not New Testament.

But in the New Testament and to the Anabaptists the spiritual qualifications of the leader are central and they are absolutely necessary and we must keep that true too, I mean that is the way it has to be, and anyone of us here, and most of us are ministers, and we could all be defrocked by falling into sin. That's just the way it is, we have to understand that.

That's Anabaptism, that's New Testament Scripture.

11]. Key Anabaptist position number 11 which is article 6 in the Schleitheim Confession, Nonresistance and separation of church and state, non-participation in civil government.

I am linking a few things together there.

They don't exactly say it like this, they mention nonresistance a little bit in one of the early articles and here the idea behind a lot of the teaching in this article is that you cannot be nonresistant and be a magistrate and so forth, but this matter of nonresistance and not serving in civil government as a magistrate or as a judge I think there is no place in the New Testament that it says you cannot serve in civil government precisely but that is the assumption, that is the assumption.

And when you look at the teachings of Christ on nonresistance you say, Well how could you ever practice nonresistance in a position of civil authority?

And that's right, that's an Anabaptist idea and it has New Testament authority behind it.

Well to the Roman Catholics and the Reformers nonresistance, non-participation in civil government, it did not make sense in a sacral society where the church and state were united, it did not make sense.

And they said: Well, you remember Peter said when Jesus asked for swords Peter said: Here are two. And Jesus said it's enough. Luke 22:38.

And they said that one was the sword of the Spirit that belonged to the clergy, the other the sword of steel and that belongs to the state, you see it is two swords and that is what you are supposed to have.

But you know Luther said: Well the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus teaching on nonresistance and loving your enemies and so forth that applies in the church but not in the state. But if the church and state are coextensive how can it apply in one and not the other? It sets up a tremendous tension. A tension felt today because he also said: A Christian must function in both realms.

Well obviously if the realms are so coextensive you have to ask so what goes out? Does the Sermon on the Mount go or does the participation in civil government go?

Well we know with Luther what went out it was the Sermon on the Mount.

It sets up a tremendous tension and it is a tension that is felt today by those who attempt to follow the Sermon on the Mount sincerely and also feel responsible to serve in the military and serve as judges and magistrates, and other areas of secular law enforcement, it is just very uncomfortable.

It sets up a tension in the soul because you are trying to keep a foot in two different kingdoms they do not belong together and it is an impossible span, it is a tremendous stretch.

Now to the Anabaptists there are two kingdoms, there is the kingdom of Christ and the church and there is the kingdom of the world, the state.

And we belong to the church and we do not serve the state but we serve Christ and tension is resolved when you give up Luther's idea of functioning in both realms and say; I will function only in the church. And the church and state are separated and tension is dissolved but the confusion persists in most churches today.

12]. Key position number 12, non-swearing of oaths. This is also from the Schleithem Confession.

Oaths are necessary to politics for legal proceedings and oaths for fealty or loyalty. In Reformation days the city of Strasbourg had an institution known as the Day of the Oath. On this day all the citizens in this city swore an oath of allegiance to the state in front of the cathedral and that included a willingness to support the state in time of war.

And it is interesting again to see that attempt to be in both realms, to mix politics and religion, it was an oath of allegiance to the state sworn in front of the cathedral, you see there it is again and today the mixture persists.

You put your hand on the Bible to swear political or judicial oaths, you see again that mixture and yet the New Testament is clear about oath swearing, Jesus said: Swear not at all, Matthew 5:34.

And James said above all things brethren swear not, above all things! James 5:12.

The Anabaptist stayed by the New Testament, they said oaths are not needed for a truthful people, our allegiance is to Christ.

But of course the Reformers did know what to do with this prohibition of swearing oaths in a sacral society, you have to have them and so what goes? The Sermon on the Mount goes you see again.

And they used oath swearing as a test, some persecutors used oath swearing as an easy and almost infallible litmus test for identifying Anabaptists, just get them to swear an oath, see if they will do it and if they don't do it you will know where they belong. Get them out of society!

13]. Key position number 13, Brotherhood assistance.

And that last one, this oath swearing was the last one in the Schleithem Confession but I'm just going to mention two more quickly – brotherhood assistance that very much was a key position of the Anabaptists.

The Hutterites made the thing legal this thing of sharing of property, the Anabaptists generally believed in private property but not private ownership exactly, I can't quite think how to say that, they believed in private ownership but they did not believe that they had any rights at all to withhold property from those that had needs, no right to do that, nobody could take property from another but the one who withheld property from the needy was immoral.

That is an Anabaptist concept and they were stronger on that than what we are I would say. The world looks at that concept today and things like barn raisings and mutual aid and it marvels, it marvels. And it is a very beautiful and powerful witness when you have that kind of witness of action rather than the witness of words, words means something but words don't mean much unless there is that kind of action behind them.

We call that brotherhood assistance or mutual aid and it is a key position.

14]. Now the last key position number 14, Evangelism.

I kept this very brief but the Reformers said that the great commission was fulfilled by the Apostles, that is their official position.

The Anabaptists said, No, no, no, the great commission remains in effect and it is for all believers in Jesus Christ and they went forth with the gospel eager, energetic and effective evangelists, many gave their lives in missionary endeavour and they had the concept that you are either a missionary or you are a mission field.

Of course the Reformers said: Well, if this is Christendom and if everybody in this state is in the church too whatever is the point of witnessing?

But the Anabaptists said no, oh no, no, the church is a called out, a subset in society, and there are people all around us that need the message of Jesus Christ and they went out and gave that message.

Evangelism, there is a lot that can be said on Anabaptist evangelism.

With the Catholics if I think about it, I'm not sure this is really the last word, but if I think about Catholics the keywords that come to my mind are Ritual and Authority.

When I think about Protestants the keywords are Grace and Theology.

When we think about the Pietists, the keyword is Emotion.

When I think of Anabaptists maybe more than any other the keyword is Disciple.

And while the Catholics build their cathedrals and their institutions and the Protestants theories and systematize their theology and the Pietists enjoy ecstasies the Anabaptists humbly take up the cross and follow Jesus Christ.

And there is some truth in all these emphasis and also value but the desperately needed, mostly neglected message and rejected message is that of discipleship of Jesus Christ.

May we be faithful to give that message.

Editor's Note: The original title of the message is "Key Anabaptist Positions" but for clarification purposes "The Rise of Anabaptism" has been used as the primary title. Complete original audio message available at:

http://www.anabaptistmennonites.net/index_htm_files/GS3150.mp3

Footnote 1: Schleithem Confession of Faith 1527 available at:

<https://www.anabaptists.org/history/the-schleithem-confession.html>

Footnote 2: Wikipedia link showing countries where Governments facilitate the payment of church leaders – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_tax



DOING GOOD OR DOING RIGHT

A young man came running to Jesus with an important question. “Good Master,” he said, “what good thing I shall do, that I may have eternal life?” Matthew 19:16

Reading this account in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke we learn that the young man occupied a position of authority and that he was very wealthy. We today, regardless of our age, wealth, or position, wait almost breathlessly for Jesus’ answer. We want to know how we might be assured of entering heaven. We want and need to know what we must do to obtain eternal life. Many people today would frame their question just like the rich young ruler did: “Master, what good thing must I do?” And still today, just like two thousand years earlier, Jesus wants to teach us that the answer to that all-important question lies not in doing good but in doing right.

At first thought, there may seem to be almost no difference between doing good and doing right. In many ways, they are similar. To do what is right is always good. But sometimes, in doing good, we do not do what is right. Many people are fixated on doing good things. It seems important to them to visit the lonely, feed the hungry, comfort the distraught, and aid those who experience misfortune. Indeed, the Scriptures say we are to do these things. Yet in doing them, people may overlook a deeper scriptural principal, all the while comforting themselves with the thought, “I have done what I needed to do.”

The religious leaders in Jesus’ day carefully did many good things. They scrupulously kept certain laws, quoted scriptures, and said their prayers. They even gave a tenth part of the small garden herbs they raised. But Jesus told them, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone” Matthew 23:23. We note that Jesus said they did well to pay their tithes, but He reproved them because their strict observance of doing good had blinded them to doing what was right. To be fair in their judging, to show mercy to the erring, and to trust

in God were of much greater importance than the tithes of their garden produce.

Good acts often have the approval of one's peers in view. We may do a good deed partly because we know the Bible teaches us to do it and partly in hope that others will notice and commend us for it. Good deeds are often motivated by human sympathy and may not be directed by an understanding of the long-term needs of the person we want to help. When doing a good work, we often follow an impulse without giving serious thought to all the circumstances involved or to the consequences that might result. To do right is often much more difficult. To understand what God would really want often requires serious thought, prayerfulness, and keenness to the voice of the Holy Spirit. It may take time to prove what is "that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" Romans 12:2. Few of our peers will notice or care about the sacrifice required when we choose to stand for the truth. Doing what is right in God's eyes usually brings no praise from others and may produce few immediate, visible fruits.

When we meet someone who has a financial need, it is relatively simple to give him some money or buy him some food. We feel we have done a good deed. In some instances, this may have been an adequate response. In other instances, doing the right thing would have required giving work to the person asking for help. Or it might have meant spending thirty minutes or an hour of our time, listening to the petitioner tell about his circumstances and choices that have brought him to where he is today, then pointing him to a better way of life and to God's solution for his troubles.

When a teenage child asks permission to attend a social function that seems somewhat questionable, one parent may say, "No, I do not want you to go." Another parent says, "Well, it's probably okay this time." Both parents feel they have made a good decision—the first because he held to a line of acceptable conduct for his child, the second because he was sympathetic and understanding toward his son or daughter. Parents who want to fully meet the need of their children will take time to prove such matters carefully and to explain to their teenagers the reason for their decision.

We may “do well” by encouraging a friend with soothing words, or we may do right by sharing a painful truth they really need to hear, for “faithful are the wounds of a friend” (Proverbs 27:6). We may feel we have done a good thing in keeping peace by going along with the wishes of others, or we may choose to do right by quietly refraining from having a part in the proposed activities.

Our love for God and our fellowmen is often the element that enables us to choose to do the right thing. When this love is lacking, we are more likely to take the easier course of merely doing good deeds. Paul clearly stated the difference between the two ways and their outcomes when he said, “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as a sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. . . And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing” 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

Loving God means to value His ways above our own. Loving Him and others enables us to look beyond superficialities and see the heart of the matter before us. Charity allows us to set aside selfish goals and desires and to help in ways that not only appear good but that really resolve problems. The rich young ruler had lived a morally good life and had probably done many good things, but he obviously lacked a true love for God and his fellowmen. Jesus told him, if he really wanted to do the right thing, he should sell his goods, distribute the proceeds to the poor, and then follow Jesus. The young man went away sad and disheartened. He would gladly have done more good things, but the cost of doing right appeared too great.
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I bring them unto Thee, O Lord-- The thoughts that come to mind--
 That Thou might sort them out for me and show me where I'm blind
 To where my thoughts and acts could lead me far from Thee astray,
 From what Thou wouldst intend for me to keep me in Thy way.

The Gospel Rises Above Cultural Barriers

And Peter opened his mouth and said: Most certainly *and* thoroughly I now perceive *and* understand that God shows no partiality *and* is no respecter of persons, Acts 10:34 (AMPLIFIED)

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek. The same Lord is Lord over all [of us] and He generously bestows His riches upon all who call upon Him [in faith]. Romans 10:12 (AMPLIFIED)

Every person on this earth is a reflection of his culture. And each one believes that his way of life is right. “Every way of a man is right in his own eyes” Proverbs 21:2. But when the gospel light shines into the heart of a sinner he suddenly finds that all he formerly considered to be the accepted way of life is now enlightened by the Spirit of God. As he opens his heart to this new light, former prejudices fade away.

May we all take the opportunity this study affords to search our hearts to see if we, like the apostle Paul, can become “all things to all men, that [we] might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22).

Our minds can hardly fathom the weight of responsibility that faced the apostles in the early days of the New Testament church. The very real daily threat of persecution added to the challenge of giving personal care to the many new members of this new faith. Undoubtedly Peter was finding it somewhat difficult to accommodate all the changes in his own life. Then he was given a vision of the unclean beasts, and this again required a change in his personal understanding of the plan of God. Peter was faithfully and boldly preaching the gospel of Jesus, but he was a Jew who still believed that no Gentiles could be accepted of God unless they also accepted many Jewish practices. There was a continued carefulness to refrain from all the customs, food, and people that were considered unclean. Into this comfortable, settled, and seemingly righteous way of life came a vision and a voice asking him to eat that which he was convinced would defile him. Peter’s conscience replied, “I will not defile myself.” The Lord’s simple reply was, “What I have cleansed, do not call common or unclean.” Oh, the faithfulness of the Spirit of God to lead us into all truth!

We can only imagine the culture shock Peter experienced as he obeyed the voice that told him to go to a people whose ways he did not understand.

However, all born-again children of God can relate to what happened next as Peter listened while Cornelius and his household told of the work of God in their hearts. Then, as seal of their testimony, right there before Peter's eyes the Holy Spirit was poured out on the group. Peter and the six brethren with him stayed for a number of days to further nurture and teach this group of new converts. How much different was the culture of the Italian band than that to which the missionaries were accustomed? No doubt the reminder, "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common," was needed and heeded many times during those days as they interacted with foreign customs, habits, and food. Yet what comfort they felt as the Spirit of God faithfully witnessed to the hearts of all present that they were of one faith.

Jesus gave His followers simple instructions to tell the gospel to the whole world. From that time until today, the people of God have faced the challenge of ministering to the diverse cultures of mankind the world over. Every race, nation, tribe, and family has an accepted way of living. Climate, geography, and economic and social pressures have all had a hand in forming each distinct culture into what it is today. To every soul in every place the Lord extends the invitation, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." Every child of God rightly believes that he is special and accepted by His heavenly Father. But our finite thinking tends to tell us that the way we do things is the way God wants all His children to do things. Then as we go forth to tell the good news we are faced with the question of what God requires of our brother whose way of life is so different from ours. Thanks be to God that there is a common ground for all of His children, regardless who we are or where we live.

The miracle of the new birth and the subsequent infilling of the Holy Spirit will break down all the walls that the evil one would like to use to divide us. People of many nations can try to unite for some common humanitarian cause, but true unity is possible only through the opening of hearts brought about by a conversion experience at Calvary. There our eyes are opened to see the many people of every tribe and nation whom God has also washed in the blood of the Lamb. Not only do we see them as blood-washed fellow saints, but we begin to see the many beautiful attributes of

other cultures and customs. We now see that our lives are enriched and blessed as we learn from the ways of others.

As we share our Christian experiences, we find that there is much to be gained by viewing life with a new perspective. The kingdom of God prospers through that which every one adds to it. It has always been the work of the evil one to tear down. He delights in causing us to focus on differences that would separate us one from another. Pride in the form of feeling superior is a temptation to every man. And nowhere is this more evident than when two cultures collide. Brethren can never fully be one in the Lord until each genuinely feels their need of the other. As long as I feel that my way is best, my brother will never really feel at home with me. Humility is the answer to our sinful inclination to being biased or partial.

In a true Christian fellowship each one readily accepts his brother's way of life as long as it does not conflict with the gospel. But neither is there compromising with the gospel standard of righteous living. It is here that we must have the indwelling Spirit of God to “prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” Romans 12:2.

God has placed each of us where we can serve Him, and it is our Christian duty to take the gospel to all men. Can we open our hearts wide enough to see beyond temporal things and catch the vision of the eternal soul longing to be set free?



The Gospel Confronts Idol Worship

2 Corinthians 4:3-5 ^(ESV)

“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.”

There is an instinctive yearning in mankind to worship a higher power. Many idols and gods have been set forth by man to fill this need. A dictionary defines an idol as an image used as an object of worship or a false god. Most idolatrous worship encourages fleshly lusts and often is associated with fear and superstition. Only the worship of the one true God requires denial of self while also offering deliverance from fear and from the burden of sin. The world today offers idols of prestige, materialism, sports, worldly wisdom, entertainment, and carnal pleasures. These idols offer security, happiness, and power but mostly result in disappointment and misery. The gospel of Jesus Christ places a judgment on the sin of idolatry and sets us free from its bondage.

We read in Acts 17:16-34 that Paul hastily left Berea because opposing Jews of Thessalonica had stirred up the local population against him. While waiting in Athens for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him he was stirred in spirit by the much superstition and idol worship in evidence. Athens was known widely for its many philosophers and learned men who loved to gather and discuss issues and theories of life and religion. They gave recognition to a multitude of gods and superstitious beliefs, and many images were set up in honor of these gods. It was said of Athens that a person strolling through her streets was more likely to meet a god than a human. Paul preached the gospel of Jesus Christ in the synagogues and in public places to those who were interested. This caught the attention of the intellectual philosophers of Athens, so they brought him to their high court, called Areopagus, located on Mars' Hill, to have his new teachings heard and examined. Many regularly gathered there to learn or to hear some new thing. Paul was ready and willing to declare the doctrine of Jesus unto them. 1 Peter 3:15 "...but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame."

A Christian who is filled with the Spirit will freely witness for the Lord. The Athenians had erected an altar "To The Unknown God" to cover the possibility of having overlooked some deity. Paul took this opportunity to declare this unknown god to them. All have those times when they feel a

lonesome cry deep in their hearts. This is the soul crying for fellowship with God. For too many it is also a cry to an unknown god. The true God is not far from anyone who feels this cry and is willing to give his whole heart to the Lord. Hearing the preaching of the Word will reveal the Lord and His plan for saving sinners. When the cry of the soul for communion with the true God is frustrated, it can readily result in some form of idolatry.

The Epicureans had a refined culture and loved luxurious living, eating and drinking, entertainments, and sensuality, much like the affluent Western world of our day. The Stoics believed that man should live above feelings and emotions because all things that happen in life, whether good or bad, are ordained by a higher power and should be experienced without emotional reactions. These two orientations portray both the permissive and the legalistic schools of thought that still plague mankind today. Either way leads away from true worship of the high and holy God who is rich in mercy but cannot condone sin.

Jesus came from God the Father as an expression of His mercy and as the only way for men to find remission of their sins. Idols are the creation of men seeking pleasure and security. Some are very attractive to the flesh and seem enduring. They may be images made of silver, gold other precious material, in fact any material including money. Affluence and higher education may seem like solid values, but often are rooted in selfishness, greed, and pride. Many millions bow to these idols. A man who found his security in earthly things and did not prepare his soul for the judgment is called, by God, a fool (Luke 12:20). The resurrected Jesus is called the “first fruits” (1 Corinthians 15:20). He is an “assurance unto all men” of the resurrection of the dead (Acts 17:31). All who have died will rise again, some to eternal life and some to eternal death.

As Paul preached the gospel to men wise in this world, some mocked, others waited to make a decision, and some believed unto salvation. All those who will not believe in Jesus have accepted some idol into their life. Idolatry results in death. Only repentance at the feet of Jesus leads to eternal life. Has the gospel taken the place of the idols in my life and set me free?

In Old Testament times, people made idols and images. Spirit powers were ascribed to these images, and men worshiped the gods made with their own hands. The devil has been pleased to personify these images with the power of his dark spirits. Men have lived in fear of their own creations because of Satan taking residence with them. Idol worship is attracting many of those who have become disillusioned with the hypocritical values of so-called Christian society. Occult practices are on the increase. Excessive focus on sustaining and acquiring physical health through carefully regimented nutritional practices and a variety of alternative medical treatments is increasingly prevalent. These often have their roots in fear and dark conspiracy theories. Those involved in these practices often manifest a religious fervor in their defense and finally come to accept occult methods and devices because “they work.” This is clearly unscriptural and is a marked threat to true faith in Christ.

The New Testament speaks very clearly to how the Christian, the born again believer is to view himself, he is no longer his own, 1 Corinthians 3:16-19^(ESV) “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple. Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness,”

We are also reminded that there cannot be a co-existence of the born again believer and idols, 2 Corinthians 6:16^(ESV) “What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

A dark storm is arising out of countries rife with idolatrous and violent religions and we can see the same influences in our own societies. These teachings are averse to Christianity and are finding increasing acceptance among people formerly considered Christian. Weak and compromised Christianity is unable to stem the tide. Only the truth exemplified in a humble spirit of peace in a believer’s life can powerfully confront idolatry. Is this witness of truth evident in our lives day by day? In our time idolatry

has taken more subtle forms and now resides in “respectable” elements of society. Many gods are served under the guise of pride, pleasure, and materialism. Materialism could be defined as devotion to material wealth and possessions at the expense of spiritual values. This god is very desirable to the flesh. Increasingly, people bankrupt themselves financially by materialistic lifestyles that cannot be sustained by their income. Are we truly “strangers and pilgrims” in this world, finding our security in heaven?

The world seems to have become pleasure-mad. This is shown by the fact that sports heroes, movie stars etc. are paid extremely high salaries to fulfill society’s lust for pleasure. A modest involvement of youthful game playing may be wholesome but must never become the central theme of Christian youth activities. Magazines, newspapers, movies and music that feed the flesh are readily available using modern technology.

Are we on our knees in prayer that the Lord will deliver us from this evil? This is necessary but is it enough? Should we also not heed Paul’s admonition as expressed in 1 Corinthians 6:18 about sexual immorality which can easily become an idol which dominates our life and also Paul’s admonition in 1 Corinthians 10:14 to flee from idolatry. Verse 13 gives us encouragement as we face what may be or are becoming idols in our life, drawing us away from God and destroying our relationship with him and most likely our brothers and sisters in Christ also, 1 Corinthians 10:13: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

A true Christian should not want to emulate, even in a small way, the appearance or behavior of worldly people who may possess more in material goods or are seen as being physically pleasing to the eye. Beauty is only skin deep is the saying, God resists the proud, pride usually manifest itself in expressions of idolatry, instead He seeks for those who are clothed with humility and gives grace to them. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God that at the proper time (God’s time) He may exalt you. 1 Peter 5:5-6. The Apostle John, speaking as a father to his children has these words for us: Little children, keep yourselves from idols. 1 John 5:21

To be a true disciple of Jesus Christ requires us to surrender every idol

MY OLD BIBLE

Though the cover is worn,
And the pages are torn,
And though places bear traces of tears;
Yet more precious than Gold
Is the Book, worn and old,
That can scatter and shatter our fears.

This old Book is my guide,
'Tis a friend by my side,
It will lighten and brighten my way;
And each promise I find
Soothes and gladdens my mind
As I read it and heed it each day.

To this Book I will cling,
Of its worth I will sing,
Though great losses and crosses be mine;
For I cannot despair,
Though surrounded by care,
While possessing this blessing divine.
— anonymous

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