



Bible Study Guide

No. 27

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Transformed by Christ

A Brief History of the Worldwide Church of God

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is “ (Rom. 12:2).

In the early 1930s, Herbert Armstrong began a radio ministry, a magazine and a church that eventually became "The World Tomorrow," *The Plain Truth*, and the Worldwide Church of God. He had many unusual doctrines. These he taught so enthusiastically that eventually more than 100,000 people attended weekly services. After he died in 1986, church leaders began to realize that many of his doctrines were not biblical. These doctrines were rejected. Today the church and *The Plain Truth* are in full agreement with the statement of faith of the National Association of Evangelicals. Here is the story of how the church developed and how it changed.

The New Worldwide Church of God

Jesus Christ changes lives. He can change an organization, too. This is the story of how the Lord changed the Worldwide Church of God from an unorthodox church on the fringes of Christianity, into an evangelical church that believes and teaches orthodox doctrines.

The story involves both pain and joy. Thousands of members left the church. Income is less than one fourth of what it once was. But thousands of members are rejoicing with renewed zeal for their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Chapter One:

A Brief History of Our Growth

The story begins in Oregon, in the 1920s. Herbert Armstrong, a newspaper-advertising designer, accepted Jesus Christ as his Saviour. He described it in his autobiography:

“Jesus Christ had bought and paid for my life by His death. It really belonged to Him, and now I told Him He could have it! From then on, this defeated no-good life of mine was God's. I didn't see how it could be worth anything to Him. But it was His to use as His instrument, if He thought He could use it...”

“In surrendering to God in complete repentance, I found unspeakable joy in accepting Jesus Christ as personal Saviour and my present High Priest.... Somehow I began to realize a new fellowship and friendship had come into my life. I began to be conscious of a contact and fellowship with Christ, and with God the Father.

“When I read and studied the Bible, God was talking to me, and now I loved to listen! I began to

pray, and knew that in prayer I was talking with God. I was not yet very well acquainted with God. But one gets to be better acquainted with another by constant contact and continuous conversation. So I continued in the study of the Bible. I began to write, in article form, the things I was learning.”

As Herbert Armstrong studied the Bible, he came to a number of unusual conclusions. Eventually, he began to preach and to lead small congregations of believers. In the early 1930s, he started a radio program and a small magazine.

Armstrong often focused on areas in which his conclusions were different from traditional doctrines. This aroused interest. He emphasized the unusual, the never-before-understood. With advertising flair, he created interest in various doctrines by teaching things that other preachers did not.

Most people did not accept his unusual views, but he persuaded a few people that traditional churches were wrong, and that he had the truth. This small group supported the radio ministry (called *The World Tomorrow*) and the magazine (called *The Plain Truth*). Finances were always tight, but the ministry gradually grew along the Pacific Coast of the United States.

Move to Pasadena, California

In 1947, Herbert Armstrong moved his ministry to southern California, so that he could have better access to the radio industry. He also began a small school to train leaders for the church—Ambassador College, in Pasadena. Finances continued to be very tight, but the ministry continued to grow as time was purchased on more and more radio stations.

Since the message went out by radio throughout North America, the people who responded to the message

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were scattered throughout the United States and Canada. Young graduates of Ambassador College were then sent to various cities to gather the believers into small churches.

The church grew rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s. The radio program was sent to England, Australia, the Philippines, Latin America, and Africa. Church offices were opened in numerous nations around the world. The name of the church was changed from “Radio Church of God” to “Worldwide Church of God.” But growth began to slow in the 1970s. Christ did not return in 1975, as many ministers had speculated. Minor doctrines were changed, weakening some members' respect for Armstrong's doctrinal authority. Armstrong's son, widely considered to be an heir apparent, was accused of improprieties, and he eventually left with a few thousand other members to form the Church of God International. Nevertheless, many people continued to be attracted to Herbert Armstrong's style and teachings, and the church continued to grow slowly until Armstrong died in 1986 at the age of 93. He left a denomination that numbered 120,000 people in attendance every week. Annual income was 200 million dollars. *Plain Truth* circulation was in the millions every month, and the television program was one of the top two religious programs in America.

Unorthodox doctrines

As the Worldwide Church of God criticised traditional Christianity, it also attracted criticism. Many people considered Herbert Armstrong to be the leader of a heretical cult. Today, the leaders of the Worldwide Church of God reject Armstrong's doctrinal errors, but we do not hide our past. Rather, we acknowledge that our errors were deep and serious, but that Christ has rescued us from them.

In some ways, we were like Saul of Tarsus, who zealously persecuted Christians. He was confronted by Christ, transformed, and given a new mission. Although he began to preach about Jesus right away, his most significant work did not come until more than ten years later, when he became Paul, the missionary apostle. We hope that we are also used by Christ to proclaim his gospel worldwide. But that is getting ahead of the story. In order to understand the Worldwide Church of God today, it is helpful to see how we started. We turn our attention now to the doctrinal mix that made Armstrong both interesting and unorthodox.

Three doctrines were instrumental in Armstrong's conversion: 1) That God is the Creator, 2) That the Bible is true, and 3) That the Bible does not change the Sabbath to Sunday. Armstrong was guided to this third doctrine by a member of the Church of God (Seventh Day), a small group that has some similarities to the Seventh-day Adventists.

Armstrong was eager to obey God, and he saw in Scripture that God commanded his people to keep the seventh day as a Sabbath. Although most Christians do not keep the seventh day, no one was able to prove to Armstrong that God ever authorized his people to change or ignore this commandment. Armstrong felt that he had to choose between Bible and tradition, and he chose the Bible. However, he had no seminary training, nor any disciplined study of church history, biblical interpretation, or the original languages of Scripture.

He reasoned that if traditional Christianity could be wrong about such a major topic, perhaps they were wrong on other things, too. Armstrong became sceptical of all Christian tradition and he studied everything from scratch. He could not find biblical proof for many traditional doctrines. This bias against traditional orthodoxy became part of the WCG culture, and it was an advertising hook that captured many people's interest.

Armstrong had a high respect for Scripture. If the Bible said it, he was willing to do it, no matter how difficult it might be. His zeal is commendable – and his respect for Scripture made his message more believable. “Don't believe me,” he often said, “believe the Bible. Blow the dust off your own Bible, and read what it says.” Many people were surprised at what they found.

Armstrong believed that Jesus is God, but he usually gave much more emphasis to God the Father. That is because some churches focused so much on Jesus that they offered “cheap grace” (as Dietrich Bonhoeffer later called it). Armstrong emphasized God's role as Lawgiver, as One who is to be obeyed.

Armstrong accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour, a substitutionary sacrifice for our sins, as divine. But he did not have the theological training to know how to reconcile the biblical data that Jesus is God and the Father is God and yet there is only one God. He mistakenly taught that God is a family, and that the Father and the Son are two beings in that family, and that when humans are resurrected, they will be born again as members of the God Family.

Armstrong did not see biblical proof that the Holy Spirit was a distinct person, so he taught that the Holy Spirit was an impersonal force. In this, his teaching was similar to the Jehovah's Witnesses, but there is no evidence that he obtained his doctrine from them. This anti-Trinitarian view had circulated in several groups. Armstrong preached that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, but he also stressed the necessity of obeying God. An emphasis on law keeping formed another major component of WCG culture.

Armstrong believed that if a person loves God, the person will obey God's commands. If a person does not keep the Sabbath, Armstrong concluded, then that person must not love God. Unfortunately, he viewed the

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Sabbath as the “test commandment” – in effect, a requirement for being considered a true Christian. Other churches were false churches, children of the devil. In addition to the weekly Sabbath, the WCG observed seven annual Sabbaths, based on Leviticus 23. WCG members also avoided pork, shrimp and certain other meats (Lev. 11). They gave one tithe to support the ministry, used another to keep the annual Sabbaths, and in some years gave a third tithe to the church for its poor members. The financial requirements were high, but they also increased the levels of commitment. Where a person's treasure is, there the heart will be also. Members of the WCG had their hearts in the church and its work.

Armstrong taught that repentance involves a change in behaviour, that Christianity involves a way of life. In the WCG, this focused primarily on prohibitions. WCG members were not allowed to vote, serve in the military, marry after divorce, go to doctors, use cosmetics, or observe Christmas, Easter and birthdays. All this emphasis on rules, however, meant that grace was rarely mentioned. Many members became legalistic in their own relationship with God, and judgmental of other Christians.

Armstrong viewed himself as God's apostle, leading the one true church. Armstrong had supreme doctrinal authority. If anyone was disloyal, that person would most likely be fired and expelled from the church fellowship. (Legally, Armstrong was under the authority of a board of directors, but they always supported his decisions.)

Armstrong also had many unusual ideas about prophecy, and these may have been the most attractive doctrines of all. He taught that the United States and Britain are modern descendants of the northern ten tribes of Israel, and that therefore many biblical prophecies apply to the Anglo-Saxon peoples. He saw himself as an end-time fulfilment of prophecy, with a message of warning for the “Israelite” peoples.

The Great Tribulation would soon start, he warned in the 1930s, in the 1940s, in the 1950s, in the 1960s, in the 1970s, and in the 1980s — but the good news is that Christ will soon return and rule for 1,000 years. In fact, the millennium was so important to Armstrong that it became the centre of the gospel. It was the reason the radio and television broadcasts were titled “The World Tomorrow.” The millennium was the good news. Obviously, there are a lot of doctrinal errors in this list. Equally obviously, we would not describe them as errors unless we had understood *why* they were in error. We have worked hard to inform our own members about where we went wrong --- and we say “we” with all honesty, for all the current leaders of the church once believed and taught these erroneous doctrines. We have all criticized other Christians as false, deceived, children of the devil.

We have much to apologize for. We are profoundly sorry that we persecuted Christians and created dissention and disunity in the body of Christ. We seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

Chapter Two: A Decade of Painful Change

Much of our doctrinal foundation was faulty. And yet part of it was true. Some of our members came from other denominations, but others were unchurched people who had little previous exposure to Christianity. Many people came to Christ in the Worldwide Church of God, accepted his death for their sins, and trusted in him for salvation. Many lives were transformed from sin and selfishness, to service and humility. A germ of life continued inside the crust of erroneous doctrines. After Herbert Armstrong died, that germ of life slowly began to grow, breaking off the crust that had once limited it. It took many years —and many tears. Here's the story:

Joseph Tkach Sr.

In 1986, shortly before he died, Herbert Armstrong appointed Joseph Tkach (pronounced Ta-cotch) to be his successor. Tkach had been a loyalist who supervised all the ministers. He was more an administrator than the magnetic personality that Armstrong had been. Tkach assigned other people to present the television program and write the articles.

The church continued to grow slowly. In 1988, Tkach made minor doctrinal changes. He taught members that it was permissible to go to doctors, take medicines, observe birthdays and wear cosmetics. He realized that many of the prophetic speculations that had made the television program and magazine so interesting couldn't actually be proven from Scripture.

Questions also arose about some of the things that Armstrong had written, and some of his books were withdrawn from circulation until further study could resolve the questions. Some members were troubled that the church was no longer teaching the same things that Armstrong had, and in 1989, 3,000 members left to form the Philadelphia Church of God to preserve Armstrong doctrines.

In 1990, the church peaked at 133,000 in weekly attendance. More doctrinal changes were made as Tkach realized that some of Armstrong's unusual beliefs, though sincere, were not biblical. The focus of the gospel is Jesus Christ and grace, not prophecy or the millennium. Budgetary reductions began to affect the television broadcast. More Armstrong literature was discontinued and/or edited.

In 1991, Tkach revised the church's explanation of what it means to be born again, noting also that humans will never become Gods. He also announced a study about the modern identity of the lost ten tribes, and accepted

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the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Membership, attendance, and income began to decrease slowly.

In 1992, income continued to decrease, and a prominent minister and 3,000 members left to form the Global Church of God.

In 1993, the church accepted the doctrine of the Trinity.

The church declared that the cross was not a pagan symbol, that it is not a sin to have illustrations of Jesus, and that Christians may vote. Such changes may seem inconsequential to most Christians, but each change was significant for WCG members because each change attacked strongly held beliefs about how we ought to express our devotion to God. Each change had to be explained from the Scriptures and had to explain how previous explanations were not correct.

In 1994, the television program was cancelled and employees were laid off. The church also explained to the members that true Christians can be found in other denominations.

But perhaps the most traumatic change came in December 1994: Tkach announced that Christians do not have to keep old covenant laws such as the weekly and annual Sabbaths, two and three tithes, and avoid pork, shrimp and other meats. In many ways, the Sabbath had been the foundational doctrine of the entire denomination, so this was the biggest change of all.

Many members did not accept these changes. After decades of understanding their identity as Christians in terms of Sabbath-keeping, and after making many sacrifices in order to keep the Sabbath, they could not easily accept the idea that it really didn't matter.

In early 1995, hundreds of ministers and 12,000 members left to form the United Church of God. Thousands more stopped attending any church, and many congregations were left with only half the members they used to have. Church income dropped another 50 percent, and hundreds of employees were laid off. Friends and families were split. It was a time of anguish and depression.

Something unexpected also happened: Many members, after struggling to understand the doctrinal change, began to experience a new sense of peace and joy through a renewed faith in Jesus Christ. Their identity was in him, not in the particular laws they kept.

The Sabbath doctrine was changed in order to be more biblical; the result was that members became more spiritual. Members focused more on their relationship with Jesus Christ; they also had an increased interest in worship. Organizationally, this doctrinal change had catastrophic results. But spiritually, it was the best thing that ever happened to the WCG.

Another major change also occurred in 1995: Joseph Tkach Sr. died after a brief battle with cancer. He designated his son, Joe, as his successor, and the board of directors honoured this appointment.

A few additional doctrines were changed later in 1995: The church officially rejected the doctrine that the Anglo-Saxons descended from the tribes of Israel, and the church permitted the observance of holidays such as Christmas and Easter.

Joseph Tkach Jr.

It was a tumultuous decade. Now, the Worldwide Church of God is about half the size it used to be. The television ministry, once one of the largest in America, is gone. Circulation of *The Plain Truth* fell from a peak of 8,000,000 down to less than 100,000. The number of employees in Pasadena fell from 1,000 to about 100. Some pastors were also terminated, and lay pastors were appointed for small congregations.

The church's properties in Pasadena are greatly underutilized and up for sale. Ambassador College/University was forced to close because the church could no longer subsidize it, and its properties have been sold. An era of change is coming to an end. Evangelical churches have also re-evaluated their stance toward the WCG. One of the first friendly groups was the Haggard School of Theology at Azusa Pacific University. Fuller Theological Seminary also helped. Cult-watching groups such as the Christian Research Institute complimented the church when it accepted the doctrine of the Trinity. In 1995, more evangelicals embraced us as brothers in the faith. We cite the International Church of the Four Square Gospel in particular. We are grateful for these gestures of reconciliation.

In March 1996, Joe Tkach wrote an editorial in *The Plain Truth* apologizing to members and all who have been hurt by the church's erroneous teachings and practices. He asked for forgiveness and cooperation. In July 1996, *Christianity Today* published a long article on the Worldwide Church of God ... "From the Fringe to the Fold," by Ruth Tucker (pp. 26-32). And in 1997, the church was accepted as a member of the National Association of Evangelicals.

Chapter Three: At a Crossroads

The apostle Paul, after his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, immediately began to preach that Jesus is the Son of God (Acts 9:20). But he was not immediately accepted into Christian fellowship. The Christians in Jerusalem were sceptical, and it took a bridge-builder named Barnabas to bring him into the group (verses 26-27). Not long thereafter, Paul was sent away to Tarsus (v. 30).

God had great plans for Paul -- but it took quite a while for those plans to be implemented. Paul spent three years in Arabia, many more years in Tarsus. What he preached and whom he reached, we do not know. But it must have been a time for Paul to clarify his thoughts.

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He had heard the arguments of the early Christians; he knew well the arguments of the Jews who did not believe. And he was faced with undeniable evidence that Jesus was in fact the Messiah.

Paul had help from his newfound Christian friends. He already knew what they were teaching, and they taught him more, and yet he still had more to think about. Why did the Messiah have to die? Why did the Jews not accept the Messiah God had given them? Where had the Jewish religion led them astray? If one could be right with God under old covenant laws, then why did God have to send his Son to die? Paul had to think about all the implications -- thoughts we would later read in his epistles. It took many years to make a transition from a worship rooted in the Old Testament, to a faith based in the new covenant.

Paul, whom God had chosen to be a missionary to the gentiles, was waiting in the wings for many years. Luke tells us that Paul wasn't even around when the first gentiles came into the church (Acts 10). Paul doesn't enter the picture until after many gentiles had already become part of the church at Antioch (Acts 11:20-26). And it was only after some time in Antioch that Paul actually got around to do the missionary work for which Christ had called him.

There are many similarities between the story of Paul and the story of the Worldwide Church of God. We have roots in the old covenant, and the new has been revealed. We have embraced the new with joy, and there have been Barnabas-like people who have helped reconcile us to other Christians, and who have helped teach us. And yet it is taking us some time to understand our identity and our role in the Christian world.

We do not have any delusions of grandeur, that we will be as great as the apostle Paul. We do not imagine that we will turn the world upside down. We do not think we will transform the church like Paul did. But we do expect God to use us to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps there is a niche out there that needs our particular experience. Perhaps God is preparing us for situations that do not yet exist. We do not know, but we remain ready to respond to God's leading.

Why do we exist?

When our foundational doctrines were changed, some people claimed that the Worldwide Church of God should just close its doors and tell all its members to go to authentic Christian churches. Ironically, we heard this not from other Christian churches, but from a few of our own members! They were angry and bitter that the WCG had caused such pain in their lives by teaching erroneous doctrines. They concluded that the WCG had been built on false pretences and therefore had no right to exist.

We acknowledge that many of our doctrines were erroneous. We acknowledge that the WCG would not exist without those erroneous doctrines. But we do not conclude that Jesus Christ rescued us as a group merely to have us disband. He has bought and paid for this church. It belongs to him, and we have told him that he can have it! If it is of any value to him, he can use it as his instrument, and we are happy to let him lead us. We rejoice in the fellowship we have with him, and we believe that he is already leading us into usefulness. Due to our shared experiences, we have things we need to learn as a group, and we will not learn these things as well if we disband. We also hope that our shared experiences also give us something to teach.

As a group, we are enjoying a new interest in worship. We are discovering spiritual gifts and lay ministry. We are learning to function in new ways.

Our strengths as a denomination include a high respect for Scripture and a willingness to do what it says. We recognize that Jesus, as our Saviour and as our Lord, gives us instructions for our thoughts, words and actions. We know that Christ makes a difference in the way we live. He transforms our lives in this age, as well as giving us eternal life.

We have also stressed prayer and study as important aspects of spiritual growth. Our recent history gives us a concern for grace, and an awareness of legalism. Of course, the story is not yet over. Jesus is not done with us yet. We are still being shaped and fashioned for his purpose. We praise him and worship him, and seek to know his will for our lives.

For further information on the history of the church, you may wish to consult one of the books listed below:

- J. Michael Feazell, *The Liberation of the Worldwide Church of God*. Zondervan, 2001.
- J. Thomas Lapacka, *Out of the Shadows: Finding God's Truth in a World of Deception*. Concordia, 2001.
- Joseph Tkach, *Transformed by Truth*. Multnomah, 1997 - this book is no longer in print, but is available on our website.
- Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*. Bethany House, 1998. Earlier editions of this book were written before most of our doctrinal changes were made. The 1998 edition has an appendix documenting our transition into orthodoxy. This appendix is available at <http://www.wcg.org/wn/98apr/cult.htm>.
- George Mather and Larry Nichol, *Rediscovering the Plain Truth*. InterVarsity, 1997.
- Ruth Tucker, "From the Fringe to the Fold: How the Worldwide Church of God Discovered the Plain Truth of the Gospel." *Christianity Today*, July 15, 1996. This is available at <http://www.wcg.org/wn/96aug27/ct.htm>

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Raising Judgmental Children

By Greg Hartman

Two years ago my son, Sam, and I were flipping through a book of history's most important paintings when we came across Kasimir Malevich's "Black Square on White Ground." As the name suggests, the painting is a black square on an otherwise blank canvas.

Sam said, "What is *that*?" I read the author's description (which, given the painting, seemed even more bombastic than usual for such books): "Malevich wants the viewer to see the barrenness of form and tone as majestic and capable of freeing us from the smallness of incident—" Sam interrupted: "It's just a black square!"

"It's an abstract," I said.

"What does that mean?"

"Well, instead of painting what they see, abstract artists paint what they feel or think. They try to say something, not show something."

Sam giggled. "I think *he's* saying he can't paint!" Okay, it's an old joke, although I suspect Sam might have been the first 7-year-old to think of it.

I Know What Parents Want

Many parents would no doubt gasp and tell me I should have told Sam not to judge something he didn't understand. But I didn't—I laughed, agreed and praised him. Why? He wasn't afraid to say what we were both thinking: It's silly to call a black square one of the most important paintings in history. I don't believe in tolerance, acceptance or open mindedness anyway. In fact, I'm deliberately raising my kids to be intolerant, judgmental and narrow-minded. And I submit that most Christian parents have the same goals whether they realize it or not.

Think about it: Do we *want* our kids to be gullible and vulnerable to peer pressure? Do we pray they'll grow up to be weak-minded, weak-willed, easily led astray? Do we hope they'll be unable to discern good from evil and intelligently apply biblical faith to everyday life? Of course not. We want our kids to be street-smart, yet pure (Matthew 10:16; Ephesians 4:14). We want them to have real compassion that emboldens them to tell the truth even when it hurts (Proverbs 27:6). We want them to be humble enough to say, "I don't know," but brave enough to be the only one to take a stand (1 Corinthians 4:6; Ephesians 6:14). We want them to be intolerant of sin, yet eager to forgive (John 8:1-11). We want them to know—and respect—the difference between moral absolutes and minor convictions (Romans 14:1-4; 1 Timothy 4:6).

X Games

The common theme in all these goals is a balance between two extremes:

Extreme No. 1: Fire at will.

I once got a letter from someone who took umbrage at my using the term *theologians* in an article:

The writer said all Christians love God and read his Word, so we are *all* theologians. He described my article as "a slap in the face of all believers" and "heresy." He also wrote my editor, saying he would cancel his subscription unless my editor fired and blacklisted me at once.

"So I'm a heretic," I remarked to my editor. "Can't get any lower than that."

He shrugged. "He could have called you a reprobate."

My article, by the way, was in a Christian teen magazine, and the angry reader was 17 years old. I don't know what his parents were like, but sadly, he had no shortage of bad examples to follow—from Jerry Falwell blaming 9/11 on feminists, to picketers at gay men's funerals, to Christians warring publicly over trivial issues such as methods of baptism and Bible versions. Whether an onlooker is looking for role models or scapegoats, it's not hard to conclude that being a Christian means fighting to the death over every issue, no matter how insignificant, indiscriminately shooting enemies and friends alike.

Extreme No 2: Surrender.

Today's mantra is tolerance, acceptance and sensitivity. When parents pay lip service to it, the results in our children can be chilling:

"Kay Haugaard teaches creative writing at Pasadena City College and says she has, for more than 20 years, been teaching 'The Lottery,' Shirley Jackson's short story in which the citizens of a small town ritually stone one of their number to death. Jackson's story used to shock people into moral judgment. No longer, according to Ms. Haugaard. After a lengthy discussion, it became apparent that her students thought they were in no position to judge people who followed different traditions.

'At this point I gave up. No one in the whole class of more than 20 ostensibly intelligent individuals would go out on a limb and take a stand against human sacrifice.'"

"The Lottery" is a fictional account of one person's death. Yet students are reluctant to make moral judgments, even about the Holocaust, according to Robert L. Simon, a philosophy professor at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY:

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“In more than 20 years of teaching college students, I have yet to meet even one student who has expressed doubts about whether the Holocaust actually happened. However, I have recently seen an increasing number of students who, although well meaning, hold almost as troubling a view. They accept the reality of the Holocaust, but they believe themselves unable morally to condemn it, or indeed to make any moral judgments whatsoever... By denying themselves the moral authority to condemn such great evils of human history as the Holocaust, slavery and racial oppression, these students lose the basis for morally condemning wrongdoing anywhere.”

Many Christians nod at such stories, remarking that the United States has indeed lost its moral footing. But studies show that Christians aren't much different

Teach Your Children Well

Most parents understand the concept of gradually giving children more responsibilities and privileges while gradually releasing them to independence. Parents wanting a successful launch from the nest will model responsibility for their kids from infancy through adulthood (see “Maximized Modeling”). The same holds true for training children in making moral judgments, says Steve Isaac, editor of *Plugged In Online* (www.pluggedinonline.com).

“You can't completely isolate children from negative influences,” Isaac says. “Even if you could, they have to learn sound judgment; sooner or later you have to unwind the leash.”

Plugged In Online's reviews detail the content of movies, TV shows or music and encourage parents to decide how best to proceed. A frequent frustration, however, is that many Christian parents simply want someone to tell them what to do.

“We teach discernment so parents can pass it on,” Isaac says. “We list positive and negative elements in movies; we suggest ways to help children think through a movie's message. But often parents call or write and say ‘Just tell me whether to let my kids watch it!’”

Scary Statistics

We've all heard frightening facts about how America has blundered into the quicksand of relativism:

- Sixty-four percent of Americans agree with the statement, “All religions are equally good.”
- Sixty-four percent of Americans believe, “Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims and all others pray to the same God, even though they use different names for that God.”
- Sixty-two percent agree with the statement “It does not matter what religious faith you follow because all faiths teach similar lessons about life.”

- Seventy-one percent of Americans agree, “There are no absolute standards that apply to everybody in all situations.”
- Seventy-two percent agree, “There is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define truth in totally conflicting ways, but both could still be correct.”

That's scary, all right. Here's something scarier:

- Fifty-three percent of those saying there is no such thing as absolute truth identify themselves as born-again Christians.
- Forty-two percent of those who identify themselves as evangelical Christians agree that “There is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define truth in totally conflicting ways but both could still be correct.”

Maximized Modeling

Child-development experts describe three separate windows of opportunity during which parents can teach values and influence by example:

Imprint Stage: From birth to about eight years old, children absorb their parents' teaching. Parents can ground children in their values with structured, but fun, teaching: games, stories, and memorization.

Impression Stage: From age eight to about 14, children are still open to parental influence, but they want to know the rationale behind their parents' beliefs and actions. Parents should be ready to discuss their faith intelligently during this stage (1 Peter 3:15).

Coaching Stage: By the time kids are about 15 direct parental influence is waning. The parent's role shifts to coaching. Parents should encourage and advise, but also let kids make, and learn from, their own mistakes.

Walk This Way

We can't all be experts on theology and apologetics. But since kids are more likely to follow our example than our advice, why not learn alongside them? Here's how and where to get started:

Let's get cynical. Studies show that kids with parents who are openly critical about the messages given in today's media are far less vulnerable to its influence. Music, TV programs and movies are jammed with hidden—or blatant—agendas. Challenge your kids to spot the landmines; point them out if necessary, whether it's an attempt to ridicule people of faith, normalize homosexuality or immorality, or encourage violence or rebellion (2 Corinthians 2:11). Take my son's example: Tell it like you see it in no uncertain terms—and pull the plug if necessary. Your kids may argue with you, insisting that song lyrics don't matter, that you're being unfair or nitpicky, or

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that you just don't understand. Stand firm: They're listening and learning more than they know.

Ask the tough questions... before someone else does.

As your kids get older and start dealing with more complex, abstract issues, openly discuss your own doubts and failures (1 Timothy 1:15).

Why does God let the innocent suffer? Does he really condemn people to hell if they don't believe in him? Kids with no parental guidance will find no shortage of sources eager to fill the vacuum. Your kids already know you're not perfect, so it's no use pretending you are—instead, model a believer whose faith survives failures and unanswerable questions (Job 13:15).

Use mistakes to your advantage. Someday you'll lose your temper with your kids, unwittingly curse in their hearing, tell a lie, unfairly criticize someone else or expose them to something you didn't intend to.

You'll need to ask your kids' forgiveness, of course. But don't stop there—discuss it with them. Challenge them to recall if they've ever faced similar temptations

or failures; ask them what you could have done differently. Ask them what else they would do to rectify the situation. Give them the chance to learn from your mistakes (Acts 10:27-35).

Noble Character

As I mentioned at the beginning, raising judgmental kids is a balancing act. I love the example set by Paul's congregation in Berea (Acts 17:11): They didn't reject Paul's message, but neither did they accept it uncritically. Instead, they listened carefully, but immediately compared everything he said against the Scriptures.

That balance between respect for principles and respect for people is just what our kids need to see. If we model it for them, we'll do much to ensure that our kids will develop the same praiseworthy noble character as the Bereans.

Of Rocks and Fig Leaves

By Ron Benson

W Flannery O'Connor creates the memorable character Hazel Motes in her novel, *Wise Blood*. As a boy, Haze follows his dad to the dark corners of a carnival, sneaks into a tent for "adults only" and sees what he knows he should not see. He is wracked with guilt and makes an attempt to do something about it:

"The next day he took his shoes out into the woods. He didn't wear them except for revivals and in the winter. He took them out of the box and filled the bottoms of them with stones and small rocks and then he put them on. He laced them up tight and walked in them through the woods for what he knew to be a mile, until he came to a creek, and then he sat down and took them off and eased his feet in the wet sand. He thought, that ought to satisfy Him. Nothing happened. If a stone had fallen he would have taken it as a sign. After a while he drew his feet out of the sand and let them dry, and then he put the shoes on again with the rocks still in them, and he walked a half-mile back before he took them off."

Hazel Motes, being a human being like me, knows by instinct that he had crossed the line. He attempts what he thinks should be adequate payment for his wrong. In the end, it doesn't seem to be enough. We are all like Hazel Motes. Guilt is in our spiritual DNA. The absence of guilt in any person is unnatural; it is normal

to sense when we've done wrong. And like any human, we intuitively know that some penalty should be paid. We believe we need to do something to take care of the debt that guilt leaves in our hearts. I call this the *Fig Leaf Dilemma*, and it stands in blatant rebellion against grace.

Grace is God's unearned, undeserved goodness alive in me. Grace achieved by my own merit or morality is not grace at all; to earn grace is to void it. That's the dilemma.

Legalism doesn't do anything to take care of our sin. *But that's not what our hearts tell us.* Our hearts tell us that we can pay for sin by making up for it, working off the debt.

We can balance out our bad side with our good side, and, as long as the good side wins, *even by an edge*, it will be enough to get us to heaven and into good standing with God. Carry enough painful rocks in your tight-tied, stiff shoes for long enough, and God should be satisfied.

Where did we get this? Where did this sense of guilt come from? Where do we get the gnawing need for repayment?

The Garden of Grace

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God didn't make the Garden of Eden a strict, repressive place to live. According to Genesis, he gave the first inhabitants a great deal of freedom and authority over his creation. He created them with minds and wills so they could make decisions and manage his work. He planted Adam and Eve in the location of grace. Here is a place, a garden named "Delight," intricately designed and maintained just for you. All you need and want to make your life full and productive will be supplied. Best of all, intimacy with your Creator comes with the location because he's decided here is where he will walk and talk with you all the time. **Did you earn this place? No. How could you? You've just been created.**

Grace is the environment, the habitat provided by God in the Garden of Eden. It is the place in which he intends for mankind to live, and it is the perfect abode for us. No other place will ever be as good as this place, *a place of grace*. Simply put: God created grace as the place in which we could live the best lives possible. There was only one rule for Adam and Eve: That they not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Presumably, God did not think it was a good idea that humans have the knowledge that the fruit of this tree would inflict.

Enter Satan, the serpentine tempter. Satan wants for Adam and Eve to live anywhere else but "Grace Land." It is grace that Satan attacks in his question: "Did God really say you couldn't eat any of the fruit here?" Is God gracious? Or is he selfish and mean? Does he care about you and your happiness, or does he want to squelch it with rules and regulations? Can you trust him?

Eve contemplated the temptation, weighed the benefits against the risk and decided to eat. She shared the fruit with Adam. Immediately, something changed. In that one, fateful instant, the nature of every man and woman born throughout the history of the world was altered. Humans would never be like Adam and Eve again.

Falling Out of Grace

The Genesis author describes what happened:

- The eyes of both of them were opened.
- They realized they were naked.
- They sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.
- They hid.

This is the moment we call "The Fall." Adam and Eve sinned; they broke the one and only prohibition and brought sin into the world. From then on mankind shared a "sin nature."

What is a sin nature? Boiled down, the sin nature means that we are all broken and all guilty. Because we are broken, we carry a weakness and propensity to sin. We are prone to it, conformed to it, weak against it. We

bear the sin nature because Adam and Eve chose to disobey.

Through the sin of Adam and Eve we inherit the sin nature. Through their eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, we inherit a good/evil economy. What did this new knowledge give them?

1. A recognition of right and wrong. (*The eyes of both of them were opened.*)
2. A realization of guilt. (*They realized they were naked.*)
3. A need to fix the problem for themselves. (*They sewed fig leaves together.*)
4. A fear that prompted them to hide from God. (*They hid from the Lord.*)

We've been caught in the trap ever since—the *Fig Leaf Dilemma*. It's legalism. It's that inward pressure, produced by the economy of good and evil inherited from Adam and Eve, calling out for us to pay our sin-debt on our own.

The Knowledge From the Tree

Adam and Eve *knew* they had sinned – gone against God's plans for them. They also *knew* they should do something about their guilt problem. They *knew* that some covering was in order. So they picked fig leaves and put them in all the most strategic places to hide their shame. But Adam and Eve also *knew* the leaves *really* didn't take care of things, so they hid.

Armed with the knowledge from the tree, humanity takes on the obligation to pay for our own sin. I face the dilemma when I try to obey a bunch of rules and regulations in order to be considered a good player on God's team.

My friend, Marty, faces the dilemma when she tries to deal with guilt feelings by following the obsessive demands of religious zealots. She heard on Christian radio once that re-fined sugar was "of the devil," so she ransacked her kitchen, tossing out offending food in order to avoid God's judgment.

Carl faces the dilemma when he questions why God is causing such havoc in his life. He's lost his job, his child died, his wife left him. His friends say God is trying to get him to acknowledge some sin. But Carl has combed through his life, confessing all, over and over, and still feels oppressive guilt.

This is the mess we find our-selves in. When we sin, we know that something is wrong and needs to be repaired. But because of our brokenness and the status of our hearts before God, *we don't have the capacity to fix the problem*. We don't have what it takes to make things right. We are impotent, in the end, to pay our own debt. We know it because we *know* good from evil; we have an ingrown calculator for the good/evil economy. We *know* we need help; the fig leaves of good works aren't enough.

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Toward the end of her story, Flannery O'Connor describes Hazel Motes' ongoing endeavor to pay his debt. The landlady finds a secret:

"Some time later she discovered why he limped. She was cleaning his room and happened to knock over his extra pair of shoes. She picked them up and looked into them as if she thought she might find something hidden there. The bottoms of them were lined with gravel and broken glass and pieces of small stone... *Who's he doing this for?* She asked herself. *What's he getting out of doing it?* Every now and then she would have an intimation of something hidden near her but out of her reach. 'Mr. Motes,' she said that day, when he was in her kitchen eating his dinner, 'what do you walk on rocks for?' 'To pay,' he said in a harsh voice."

Drop the Fig Leaves

Hazel Motes fights the *Fig Leaf Dilemma* throughout his life, without ever understanding the futility of the truth:

- Fig leaves never cover.
- Legalism doesn't work.
- We can't fix the problem.

Back in the Garden, God looks for the guilty party, his treasured but soiled friends. In love, God seeks out the ashamed.

He knows Adam and Eve need to come clean. He knows they need to confront their sin and their subsequent game of cover-up. He asks, "Where are you?" not because he needs to know, but because they need to admit and confess. Adam and Eve, and you and I, must eventually come to confess sin. But not only that, we must come to the end of ourselves and recognize our feeble attempts to remedy the problem, admit we are helpless and accept what God offers. We have to drop the fig leaves.

Genesis 3:21 says, "The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them." This is no small matter. Adam and Eve stood before God already clothed. They had made coverings, sewed fig leaves, *for themselves*. But it wasn't sufficient.

What they had done, by way of disobedience, was an offense to the holy character of Al-mighty God, their Heavenly Father. *More than fig leaves were necessary*. What they had done by taking initiative to handle their shame was insufficient. Adam and Eve, and the rest of humanity after them, had to learn that their efforts to handle their sin *for themselves* would never, ever be enough.

In essence, God says, "Let me do it for you. You'll have to trust me on this. What I provide for your shame will be enough, my grace is sufficient." *Take the rocks out of your shoes*— you've got to do this God's way.

God's way is through the sacrificial death of Jesus, the son God loved. God's way is prefigured in Genesis by the taking of life in order to cover sin. God's way is that Jesus gives his life to provide permanent covering for all of our sin.

In love, God still hunts us down, still seeks out the ashamed, the afraid, the guilty. His holy presence still embarrasses us, still allows us to sense our nakedness when we come to him. His desire is that we eventually be restored to Eden's grace. He still offers the cure: "My grace is sufficient."

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Reading Through Romans

Jews and Gentiles Together

Chapter 15

In Romans 15, Paul completes his discussion of how Christians who are strong in the faith should help those whose faith is weak. He reminds his readers that God is calling the Gentiles to salvation, and that they are the focus of Paul's ministry. Paul shares his plan to visit Jerusalem with an offering from the Gentiles to give to the Jewish believers.

The strong should help the weak

In chapter 14, Paul explained that Christians who were strong in the faith believed that everything was clean and could be eaten. Those who were weak in faith were cautious about their diet and

observed certain days as special. This difference of opinion was a serious problem for the Roman churches, so Paul took a considerable portion of his letter to address it. The cautious Christians should not condemn the more permissive ones, and those who feel free

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should not cause the weak to sin by pressuring them to do things that their conscience did not yet allow.

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves (15:1). The people who are confident of their salvation in Christ need to be tolerant of the doctrinal mistakes that others have. Their faith is already weak; we should not challenge them more than they can bear. Paul taught that all foods are clean, but he sometimes restrained his freedom (1 Cor. 8:13; 9:20).

Paul then gives the general principle: **We should all please our neighbours for their good, to build them up** (v. 2). He uses Jesus Christ as the model we should follow: For even **Christ did not please himself...** Paul supports his point by quoting Psalm 69:9, a messianic psalm: **“As it is written: ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me’”** (v. 3). Christ was willing to accept persecution, so the strong should be willing to accept a little inconvenience.

Some people might wonder why Paul is using the Old Testament. He has already used it dozens of times, but now he explains: **For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope** (v. 4). Paul isolates two lessons we can draw from the Old Testament: endurance and encouragement. We need to endure difficulties, and God is faithful to us.

Gentiles praising God

Paul includes a brief prayer: **May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ** (vv. 5-6). That is, may God give you the attitude of service that leads to worship together.

Paul concludes: **Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God** (v. 7). Just as Jesus gave up his privileges to serve us, we should be willing to give up some of ours, so people will praise God. Reconciliation with God should lead us toward reconciliation with other people.

For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth... (15:8). Paul mentions this because of the situation in Rome: He is asking the strong (primarily Gentiles) to restrain their freedom when with the weak (primarily Jews). He now begins to defend his ministry to the Gentiles.

Why did Christ serve the Jews? Paul explains: **So that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy** (vv. 8-9). It is only through Christ that people may be forgiven and thereby receive the patriarchal blessings. But Christ’s purpose extends beyond the physical descendants of Abraham—he also wants Gentiles to bring glory to God.

Paul now presents a series of Old Testament prophecies about Gentiles joining the Jews in worshipping God. He begins with Psalm 18:49: **Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.** Then he moves to the Gentile response to the good news: Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people (Rom. 15:10; Deut. 32:43).

Then the Gentiles join in the praise: **Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples** (v. 11; Ps. 117:1). Paul concludes with a quote from Isaiah 11:10, showing that this praise comes through the nations accepting the Messiah, the descendant of David and Jesse: **The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope** (v. 12).

Then Paul gives another short prayer, a benediction good for believers everywhere: **May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit** (v. 13). Through faith in Christ, we have tremendous hope.

Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles

With tact, Paul explains why he wrote to the Roman church: **I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another. Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles** (vv. 14-16). Since Christ appointed Paul to serve the Gentiles, he felt that he could remind them that basic Christian principles would help them deal with the doctrinal differences they had.

He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (v. 16). Paul uses special terms here to call his mission a work of worship. He is zealous in this mission: **Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by**

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what I have said and done (Rom. 15:17-18). Paul is giving the credit to God, not himself.

The results of Paul's ministry can be seen in the fact that Gentiles are obeying God. This does not mean circumcision, food laws or Sabbaths—the Gentiles are considered obedient without keeping such laws.

How has Christ achieved this result through Paul? **By the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God** (v. 19). Although Acts describes several miracles done through Paul, Paul rarely mentions them. His readers needed to follow him not by doing miracles, but in humility and enduring difficulties.

So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum [modern Albania], **I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ** (v. 19). Paul did not preach in every city, but everywhere he preached, he proclaimed all the gospel. He preached in a few cities, and after he left, his converts could then take the gospel to surrounding towns.

It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation (v. 20). At some point in his life Paul decided that his mission was to go to new areas. He saw his work as a fulfilment of Isa. 52:15: **As it is written: "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand."** **This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you** (vv. 21-22). This verse does not apply to every missionary, but it described what Paul was doing.

Although Paul had wanted to visit Rome earlier, there was a greater need for the gospel in Asia Minor and Greece. Now, Paul sets his sights farther west—Spain—and that will give him an opportunity to visit Rome. But he had a more important mission to take care of first.

Paul's travel plans

Greek letters often mentioned the writer's travel plans, and this letter does as well. Paul begins with an almost humorous exaggeration: **But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while** (vv. 23-24).

Paul would never live long enough to take the gospel to all the empire, so he wanted to make a decisive leap

westward. He not only invited himself to Rome, he also invited them to support his mission—perhaps even provide some assistants.

But other plans were more immediate—the churches in Greece were sending an offering to the believers in Judea. Paul had urged them to do it, for he felt it was very important to send this token of unity from the Gentiles to the Jews. **Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord's people there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings** (vv. 25-27).

The Greek Christians had a debt to pay. But what could the Roman Christians do? It was too late for them to join in the offering being sent to Jerusalem. Paul is hinting that the Gentile Christians in Rome should help the Jewish Christians in Rome. Paul wants peace between Jews and Gentiles, whether it is in Rome or in Jerusalem.

So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ (vv. 28-29). Paul viewed this offering as a symbol of the spiritual fruit produced by the gospel among the Gentiles.

The message he wanted to send to the Jerusalem church was this: "See how many Gentiles are now praising God because of the mission you began. They are thankful that your Messiah is also their Messiah, and as the Scriptures predicted (Isa. 60:5; 66:20), they are sending gifts to Jerusalem as a firstfruits offering to sanctify the rest of the harvest among the Gentiles."

Paul was confident that after he had delivered this offering, that Christ would bless his mission to Rome and Spain. He asks them to help him in his difficult mission by praying for him: **I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favourably received by the believers there...** (vv. 30-31).

As Acts 21 confirms, the most dangerous part of the trip was not the voyage, but the disobedient Jews (an ironic contrast to the obedient Gentiles). Paul did not assume that the believers would be glad to see him, either—he

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wanted prayer that they might accept the offering he was bringing. Some did not want to accept the fact that Gentiles were now in the family of faith.

And after the offering, Paul wanted them to pray so **that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed. The God of peace be with you all. Amen** (vv. 32-33). Paul concludes with a

benediction of peace—what the Roman churches needed most. He says “amen,” but he is not yet done. In our next issue, we will discuss the greetings and exhortations of chapter 16.

Michael Morrison
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Questions for discussion

- What scruples do weak-faith Christians have today, and in what way should we bear with them? (v. 1)
- How do the Old Testament scriptures encourage us? (v. 4)
- In v. 7, Paul uses Christ as a model we should follow. Are there aspects of Jesus that we should not follow?
- Do we “overflow” with hope when we trust in Christ? (v. 13)
- How well do we teach one another? (v. 14)
- If evangelism is a priestly duty (v. 16), does it apply to all Christians?
- Should we assist missionaries who are on their way to another region? (v. 24)
- Are we obligated to share material blessings with the Jews, or should we share with some other parent group? (v. 27)
- Do we pray for missionaries in dangerous areas? (v. 31)

Lessons from the Bible

The gospel of mark, Lesson 19: mark 3:20-27

A lesson about envy

Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.” And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, “He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.”

So Jesus called them and spoke to them in parables: “How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house.

The Bible tells us that Jesus was made like his fellow humans in every way (Hebrews 2:17). In this passage we find that like many of our families, Jesus' family was ready to have him committed. They came down to “take charge” of him, believing him to be out of his mind.

Blindness of envy

Among the reasons Jesus was considered out of his mind, Mark informs us, was that Jesus was running afoul of the authorities. He was banishing demons from

people, and the authorities, who apparently weren't, found Jesus' growing popularity most irritating. It is a little reminiscent of Saul's jealousy over David's military success recorded in 1 Samuel 18. You might think a king would be grateful for the victories of a top general. But not so—Saul saw David as a threat. He feared the people might get the idea that David would make a better king.

The same dynamics seem to be at work between Jesus and the authorities. Jesus was getting too popular. His power over the evil spirits was plain, which made it

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obvious to everyone that he had the blessing and power of God.

So the authorities saw Jesus not as a blessing, but as a threat. Jesus was better liked than they were. And he was clearly more powerful.

So what to do? Discredit him, of course. But how?

Well, let's see—suppose we tell the people that he has power over the demons because he is demon-possessed himself. Yes! That's the ticket! The man is demon-possessed, and not just by any demon, but this Jesus whom you are cheering is possessed by Beelzebub himself!

Truth aside

Truth was not the governing factor. God's will was not a consideration. The joy of those freed from wicked oppression didn't matter. There was only one goal—discredit anyone who makes us feel insecure. Say whatever has to be said.

The accusation, of course, was absurd, and Jesus exposed it as such. "If Satan opposes himself and is divided," Jesus said, "he cannot stand; his end has come."

But Jesus' remark was deeper than merely exposing the silliness of the authorities' accusation. The truth was, Satan's end had come, but not because Beelzebub was kicking out demons through Jesus.

The end of Satan's kingdom had begun because the Son of God had walked onto the stage of history. Jesus continued: "In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house." Jesus was freeing people from demons because Satan had no power to stop him.

And the authorities knew that. They were not blind. They saw the works of deliverance. But it is possible, even for us, to become so selfishly oriented that we place the preservation of our personal goals above even the hand of God.

Redemption

John wrote, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). When our trust is in Jesus Christ (which is the same thing as walking in the light), we have fellowship with one another. This is a fellowship that breaks through the walls of self-centered living. People matter to us.

Jesus told the disciples: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). Just as light overpowers darkness, so love leaves no place for selfish envy.

Jesus was not a person to the authorities. He was an obstacle, a faceless object to be cleared out of their path. He didn't matter. Have you ever been treated that way? Take heart: Jesus travelled that path before you. He knows what you're experiencing.

Have you ever treated someone else that way? Take heart: Jesus has forgiven you. And if you will receive it, he gives you a heart that can see people as people, not as obstacles in your path. Let's agree to take a look at the relationships in our lives. If there is someone we've been disparaging, maybe it's time to take our concerns to Christ the Redeemer instead of the grapevine.

For Reflection

- Has someone received a blessing you felt should have come to you? How have you responded?
- How have you treated that person?
- Have you been mistreated recently?
- How have you coped with it?
- Have you asked God for his peace (Phil. 4:7)?

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