

Test the Spirits

Revealing the Demonic
Strategy for the End Times

Steven L. Highlander

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Published by Emmaus Road Ministries
Independence, Missouri

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my wife, Brooke, who has spent the last twenty-four years with me on this journey. From pastoring churches in the Midwest to living in a hut in the South Pacific, she has been a constant companion, an able minister of the New Testament Gospel Message, as I have endeavored to serve the Lord.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My wife and I spent the last several years living and working as national missionaries for the Foursquare Gospel Church of Papua New Guinea. I want to acknowledge the great leaders and friends I have had the privilege of working with over the years.

Dr. Jerry Stott, Associate Global Director for the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel in the South Pacific. Jerry has continually inspired me to walk in faith and try new things. Jerry, thanks for having my back.

Rev. Timothy Tipitap, President of the Foursquare Gospel Church of Papua New Guinea, and the South Pacific Representative on the Foursquare Global Council. President Tipitap has been a great national leader to work with. Our conversations would often end with Timothy saying, “God will make a way.” Pastor Timothy passed away in March 2021.

Pastor Wayne Norumu, General Superintendent of the Foursquare Gospel Church of Papua New Guinea. Ps. Wayne’s commitment to the ministry of the Holy Spirit is always a great encouragement.

Pastor Rodney Tom’Riesa, Pastor of Living Light Foursquare Gospel Church and member of the PNG Foursquare National Executive Council. He is a faithful pastor and visionary leader for the Foursquare Gospel Church of Papua New Guinea.

Thanks to all the other pastors and leaders who have contributed to my life over the years. I would not be who I am without your input, encouragement, and fellowship.

WHY THIS BOOK IS IMPORTANT

Some themes in the Bible get very little notice. It is often not a trending message of the hour, or it is just not popular. As a missionary in Papua New Guinea, I see how easily deception, false doctrine, and fleshly methods infiltrate the Church.

The Spirit of the Lord began directing my attention to the abundance of Scripture warning the Church about deception. This deception is one of the most prolific warfare tactics of the devil in the last days. Every New Testament writer warned that the end times would see a significant onslaught of spiritual deception.

While deception has always been a go-to weapon for Satan, the Bible is repetitively clear—deception will be the hallmark of the last days. Days, incidentally, in which you and I live. While the Church has had to battle lies and deceit through the ages, it has never been as widespread as it will be from here until the second coming of Jesus.

This is the reason that I wrote the book, and the wise reader will heed the warning and wisdom it contains.

In conveying the message's significance, it was necessary to point out what some would consider a *negative* emphasis. The current trend in the Church is to accentuate the positive. Some only want to talk about God's blessings. While I do not want to minimize these Biblical topics, we must heed Biblical warnings to navigate the last days safely.

My intent is three-fold. First, to simply point out the abundance of Scripture related to this subject. The Bible discusses it more than tithing, baptism, pastoral ministry, communion, and many other topics put together. In short, it is a prominent theme in the Bible—and frankly—I have never heard a message about it in the past twenty years. The second is to sound a Biblical warning about the enemy's strategies for the days in which we live. The third reason is to prepare Christians individually—and the Church corporately—to win the last days' battle.

One last warning. Few of us think we could be deceived. This self-confidence is the trap stick where Satan places the bait. Paul warned us that in the last days, God would send strong delusion on those that “*did not receive the love of the truth.*” I talk about this Scripture in depth later in the book. However, it is necessary for us to love truth—more than our pet doctrines, practices, and programs. I encourage you to humbly consider yourself and ask the Holy Spirit to keep you in the truth.

The Holy Spirit is bringing change to the Church these days. Seasons of change—we called it *Reformation* 500 years ago—are prime times for deception. Satan deceived some to keep them from moving into the changes God wants to make. Others, giving heed to false doctrines and experiences, throw away Biblical Christianity in favor of any new doctrine that comes along. Somewhere in the middle of these two extremes is a genuine move of the Holy Spirit to propel the Church ever onward and upward, within the boundaries of Biblical Christianity.

Some pastors have said. “As Christians, we do not have to worry about being deceived; God protects us.” They allude to Matthew 24:24 and claim a built-in safety factor in Jesus' words, “if it were possible to deceive even the truly elect.” Of

course, they take the phrase “if it were possible,” to mean that it is impossible to deceive a true believer.

However, is that a plausible interpretation? The Bible talks about Christians who were deceived in the first-century Church. It warns of a coming great apostasy in the last days. It laments those who learned the truth but turned aside to vanity and profiteering in the name of Jesus. To say it is impossible to deceive a real Christian simply is not Biblical, nor can it be empirically observed in real life.

I agree we do not have to give in to deception. The Biblical writers warned us to pay attention and TEST THE SPIRITS. We must not support a casual attitude towards the possibility of deception. On the contrary, it urges us repeatedly to stay tuned in to the Holy Spirit.

This book will give you some information and tools to apply to the doctrines and experiences that are inundating the Church in these last days.

I commend you to the faithful ministry of the Holy Spirit to guide you into all truth and keep you from the lies and “devices” of the wicked one.

Remember, Jesus said, “When the Spirit of Truth comes, He will guide you into all truth.” We do not have to fall for the deception of these last days. We have the Comforter to keep us on track, moving toward the blessed hope of the second coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 1

THE NATURE OF THE BATTLE IN THE LAST DAYS

In 1980, I started my life-long journey as a new Christian. However, early in my Christian life, I had a very troubling spiritual experience. My boss at the newspaper I was working for gave me a book. Even though he was not spiritual himself, he knew I had recently become interested in spiritual things. I was curious, and I read everything I could get my hands on about my newfound faith. I am sure he meant well, but it did not go well. Being rather foolish, I was about to experience what I would later discover was the first attack on my spiritual life, faith, and ultimately, God's plan and purpose for me in His Kingdom.

I will finish the story in a minute, but first, we need to consider the reality of spiritual warfare that every Christian will encounter from the time of their salvation. The apostle Paul told the Corinthians believers that the devil was very tricky and used *devices*. He wanted them to understand the spiritual warfare they faced because he did not want the devil to "take advantage of them."

...lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices. 2 Corinthians 2:11

There are two things you need to understand from this passage of Scripture. First, that Satan is looking for ways to gain an advantage over you. Second, he is a schemer. He uses

well-planned tactics to war against Christians.

The word *devices* mean something thought out. The devil's strategy against the Church is not haphazard: it is purposed and planned.

Elsewhere Paul described them as *wiles* or *schemes* of the devil and encouraged the Ephesian believers to put on their spiritual armor and stand firm against them.

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. *Ephesians 6:10-13*

The word *wiles* means to *lie in wait* or to ambush. It also carries the idea of craftiness, trickery, or deceit. Ambushes only work when they are not expected. This is the nature of the enemy's warfare against you. The fact is, you are engaged in spiritual warfare with a tricky enemy who uses every deceitful means to trick and trap you into sin or false doctrine, with the goal of rendering you useless to God and possibly destroyed.

However, the Bible says the Spirit of God in us is greater than the devil and all his demons (1 John 4:4). We have spiritual armor to defend ourselves (Ephesians 6), and spiritual weapons take the battle to the enemy (2 Corinthians 10:4). The spiritual fight should not be totally defensive. We need to go on the offensive and take territory (souls and even geographical regions) from the enemy.

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds.... 2 Corinthians 10:4

The strongholds we are pulling down are demonic strongholds. They are the lies, doctrines, and devices the devil and his angels hide behind. This is not a defensive battle—this is an offensive battle. When an enemy is in a stronghold, he is defending himself against attack. We need to put Satan in the defensive position.

In this passage in Ephesians, we discover we can quench ALL the enemy's fiery arrows with the shield of faith. My brother or sister, God did not leave you at the mercy of the devil. He has given you everything you need to win the battle. Again, Paul tells us God **“always causes us to triumph in Jesus Christ”** (2 Corinthians 2:14). That said, we need to understand that God never said there would not be battles—only that we never need to be defeated in the end.

Wolves and Tares—An Enemy Within

We must understand that one of Satan's strategies involves working from inside the Church. Jesus and the other Biblical writers were explicit about this. Jesus warned of “wolves in sheep's clothing” (Matthew 7:15) and told a parable about the enemy sowing tares among the good wheat (Matthew 13). In this parable, Jesus said that an enemy had sown tares (false Christians and leaders) into the field with good wheat (true Christians). The enemy intended to reduce the harvest drastically. The weeds choked the good wheat, stealing the moisture and nutrients needed to produce an abundant harvest. While there would be a harvest, it was not the volume it could or should have been.

Jesus declared it would be this way until the end, but that the

tares would be removed first and burned, then the grain harvested and gathered to the barn.

The demonic powers that resist God do everything in their power to stop people from accepting the gospel message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. When that fails, they immediately start life-long warfare with a four-pronged attack.

1. The first prong of attack is simply to keep a new Christian from becoming a serious disciple and, ultimately, from being a servant of God. This usually happens through worldly distraction and a lack of Biblical discipleship.
2. The second prong is corruption through temptation resulting in sin and rebellion. There are some Christians who either never get out of sin or return to sin for various reasons. Demonic forces often instigate these temptations and trials. God never tempts us to sin (James 1:13).
3. A third prong entails persecution and offense that cuts off a believer from faith and relationship with God. By either making it difficult to live a Christian life because of persecution or getting the believer to be offended at God (or God's people), he intends to shut down a person's faith and trust in God. James said that we should not think these things are strange. He wanted us to know the testing or trial of our faith works a process of maturity in us (James 1:2-16).
4. The fourth prong of attack involves an effort to pervert and detour the Christian with false doctrine. It is this device of Satan that I want to uncover in this book and give you the tools and weapons to fight—and win—the spiritual battle you and those around you are facing. Remember, we win if we are not ignorant of the fight or

the enemy's tactics and use the spiritual weapons and tactics provided by God in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus dealt with these types of attacks in His parable of the seed and the sower (Matthew 13). In that parable, you will discover the point of His teaching was fruitfulness or lack of fruitfulness. Ultimately, the demonic principalities and powers you fight with do not want you to produce fruit for the Kingdom of God. That is Satan's end game. To destroy you personally would be a great victory for the devil. To keep you from influencing hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of others for God, is an even greater victory. You must not allow this.

To sum up these thoughts, it is essential to see four word-pictures Biblical writers used to portray Satan's attacks on God's people.

1. In the book of Genesis, Satan comes as a serpent or snake. He is a deceptive liar, calling God's word and character into question. Demonic forces often come to the new believer in this way. The fundamental attack on Christianity can be found in the serpent's words, "Did God really say that?" This is the war-cry of the world, liberal scholars and others who do not want any type of genuine spiritual authority in their lives. The Bible—the Word of God—is the basis for all faith (Romans 10:17). If Satan can rob the Bible of its authority, there is no basis for faith, and therefore, no basis of relationship with God. We are lost without the true Word of God.
2. The apostle Paul provides the second word-picture. He tells us that Satan comes as an "angel of light" and that his demons transform

themselves into “ministers of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). Here we see demonic powers using deception and false doctrine to wage warfare from within the Church. This tactic places demonically inspired teachers and leaders *inside* the Church. The goal here is corruption from the inside, not external persecution. In all honesty, with God, there is not truth and opinion. There is truth, and there are religious lies. Jesus said we would “know the truth and the truth would set us free.” Religious lies or doctrines of demons will never produce freedom. In fact, one test of doctrine is if it liberates or tends to create more rules and rituals.

3. Third, John portrays Satan as a dragon in the twelfth chapter of the Book of the Revelation. In this role, Satan is a fierce persecutor of the Church. As a serpent and angel of light, he depended on deception, trickery, lies, and false doctrine to move the Christian and the Church off course. When all those strategies fail, he turns to persecution and suffering to get people to quit following Jesus.
4. Fourth, John calls Satan the “accuser of the brothers” (The Book of the Revelation chapter 12:10). In this role, he uses the world and even other Christians to attack and defame ministers before God and the world, all with the goal of minimizing their fruitfulness. Do not become an agent of the demonic by accusing your brothers and sisters in Christ.

There are other descriptions of the devil in the Bible. However, in these four word-pictures, we find the essence of

the spiritual warfare I have described.

Now that you get a general idea of the spiritual warfare you are engaged in, I will finish the story I started earlier in this chapter.

A man had come through our town a few years earlier preaching on the power of the name of God. He had written the book I had been reading. He taught that God revealed Himself in the Old Testament by a specific Hebrew name. (I am not going to tell it to you lest you are tempted to try what he suggested and have the same demonic attack I experienced). He taught that the power of God was only accessible through His special name and that by repeatedly chanting it—in faith—a person could tap into the power of God.

This all sounded particularly good to me. I could know the unique name of God and the power of God. I could be special.

He had some scripture to back it up (even though it had been twisted). I was being offered some unique revelation others did not have. This appealed to my flesh also. Satan set the trap with the best bait—and I was about to trip the trigger.

As a new Christian, I did not have the Biblical understanding or the spiritual wisdom to discern the danger. I made several mistakes here that I will detail for you in a minute, but first, I will describe what happened.

I read the book because I wanted to experience the power of God. It was through a search for spiritual power that I started seeking God. Even before I became a Christian, Satan had made a few attempts to get me sidetracked. I did a lot of drugs and alcohol. My friends and I experimented with occultic practices like seances, Ouija Boards, Extra Sensory Perception (ESP), automatic writing, and other demonic

practices. However, the Spirit of God protected me and, through my mother's prayers, led me to faith in Jesus Christ, even while I was searching in all the wrong places.

Now, getting back to my story. One night I decided to practice what this guy was teaching. I liked to go for walks in the evening, praying and meditating. This night I decided to chant the special name of God until I experienced something. I did not get what I wanted—which was an encounter with God. I got an encounter with a demonic spirit. Something came on me. Immediately my spirit was grieved. It was more than grieved. I felt intense demonic oppression. I had naively opened myself up to a demon spirit through false teaching disguised as deeper spiritual truth.

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron.... 1
Timothy 4:1-2

Notice the result of this type of demonic attack. Some Christians and even pastors and teachers gave heed. They paid attention to the doctrinal lies, started believing them, and ultimately teaching them to others. The acceptance of those demonic doctrines caused their spiritual discernment and even their consciences to be made useless. They shut off the Holy Spirit's voice to them. I will add emphatically that this happens when Christians start to tap into any demonic activity seeking spiritual answers or power in their lives. ESP, fortune tellers, tarot cards, seances, astrology, contacting the dead, consulting psychics, and other similar practices shut off a Christian's communication with God.

Now, back to my story. The feeling overwhelmed me. It scared me. I was spiritually disoriented, and I knew it. The effect was

immediate. I had not been a Christian long, but it was long enough to know I could call on the name of Jesus for help. I repented and cried out to God to restore my soul. I renounced my actions and asked for forgiveness. I immediately knew it was wrong, and my experience was disconcerting. I prayed for perhaps fifteen minutes fighting against this attack. Finally, the Spirit of God gave me the victory—the demon left, and my spiritual peace was restored—although it would be a couple of days before I felt normal again.

I had learned a vital lesson early on in my Christian life. You cannot merely believe everything anyone says—even if they use the Bible as a basis for their teaching.

I want to be honest. I made several significant mistakes while falling for this device of Satan.

My first mistake was assuming anyone talking about God and using the Bible was telling the truth. In the next chapter, you will discover how much Jesus and all the other New Testament writers had to say about spiritual deception and false apostles and prophets.

My second mistake was not taking this *new revelation* to my spiritual leaders or brothers or sisters who had been Christians longer than me. One of Satan's tactics is to play into the human desire to be special and to have unique spiritual knowledge. In the guise of a serpent, he tempted Adam and Eve with secret knowledge. "You can be like God, knowing good and evil," he hissed.

Since that day, Satan has been offering men secret spiritual knowledge through the occult, religious cults, and even organizations like the Masonic Lodge and the Shriners. In the first and second centuries of the Church, a philosophy called Gnosticism (the Greek word means "having knowledge") was

a significant problem confronting the truth taught by the apostles. The Gnostics claimed that a person was not saved by faith in Christ but through secret knowledge. Of course, you had to get this secret knowledge from them, which meant they had some control over their cult members' lives. We will discuss Gnosticism and the concept of secret knowledge and hidden doctrines in a later chapter.

My third mistake was seeking spiritual knowledge or experience without Biblical understanding. To be fair, I had not been a Christian long and did not have a lot of Biblical teaching yet to protect me. I did learn an important lesson, though. You cannot accept as truth everything that has a Bible verse or two attached to it. Even in his attempt to war against Jesus, the devil quoted the Bible to Him. Of course, it was a twisted application designed to manipulate Jesus to sin. However, we must understand that if Satan would go so far as to use this tactic (device) on Jesus, it must be one of His best weapons.

Submitting new revelation to your spiritual leaders and people you are in fellowship with is wisdom. It is at this point demonic forces will use your pride against you. "Be special," they whisper, appealing to our egos.

We can sum up this chapter by saying that every Christian is in a spiritual battle. Satan is a liar and a deceiver, and we should be careful to use the spiritual gifts, tools, and weapons that God has given us to consistently fight and win the battle for ourselves, our families, and those around us. One of the best ways to stay safe is to submit your "revelation" to open discussion with experienced Christians that know the truth. Perhaps your revelation is correct. Discussing it provides a broader platform for your understanding to spread. And, if it is not the truth, it is safe for you and others to discover it quickly.

In the Book of the Revelation 2:1-8, Jesus commended the Ephesian believers for their diligence in discerning true and false apostles and prophets—and by extension, true and false teachings, and revelations.

To the angel of the Church of Ephesus write, “These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lamp stands: “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lamp stand from its place—unless you repent. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”

JESUS WARNS OF DECEPTION IN THE LAST DAYS

The Bible is clear that God ordained a variety of gifts and ministries for evangelism, discipleship, spiritual health, and the advancement of His spiritual Body—the Church. We discover these gifts and anointings in three key passages of Scripture that inseparably entwine the gifts and anointings of God with the practical functioning of the Body of Christ. While a discussion of the gifts and anointings of the Holy Spirit are outside the scope of this book, you should stop and read these three passages of Scripture to get a quick understanding of what we are talking about. Romans chapter twelve, 1 Corinthians chapters twelve and fourteen, and Ephesians chapter four explain Paul’s revelation of the Body of Christ, in conjunction with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

(For an in-depth study of the gifts, ministries, and anointings God has for the Church please read another book I wrote titled: Four Anointings Every Church Should Have: Establishing the Body of Christ in the Local Assembly.¹

You do not find the gifts of the Spirit discussed apart from the Body of Christ. Even a casual study of the Bible will show that they are inseparably linked. This is a serious error some Pentecostals and Charismatics have made. They separate the gifts of the Spirit and the ministries ordained by God from their function in and to the Body of Christ. They wrongly

¹ You can read or download a free PDF version online at stevehighlander.com.

focus on the gift or the minister.

When we use the gifts and anointings described in the Bible correctly, the focus is on the Body of Christ. The various spiritual gifts and ministries are *functions*, not offices or positions. We might consider spiritual gifts as gifts *to* the Church *through* a person rather than a gift *to* a particular person. Understanding the anointings and ministry gifts as functions will cause us to serve the Body of Christ with our calling and unction.

When we divorce gifts and anointings from the Body of Christ, the focus shifts to the person operating in a gift or anointing.

Spiritual gifts and callings are sometimes considered positions, offices, or titles rather than functions. Positions, offices, and titles tend to produce privilege and command a certain level of authority. When this happens, the Body of Christ can quickly become secondary to the gift and the ministry. Rather than using the gifts to bless the Body of Christ, the Body of Christ can be used for the minister's benefit. This should not be.

Many of us have dedicated our lives to serving Christ and His Church. We have the respectable fear of God. We would not dare use God's people for selfish gain. Yet there are many throughout the two-thousand-year history of the Church who have done just that. It might be difficult for some to understand, but some declare themselves to be Christian leaders who do not have your best interests in mind. They have used the Church to profit financially or fulfill a lust for power or control. Others are simply deceived. They think they are taking a stand for God when, in fact, they are not! Jesus warned His disciples that the day would come when people would kill them, thinking they were doing God a favor (John

16:2-3).

The truth is there are true apostles and prophets operating today, and there are false apostles and prophets working today. You need to be able to discern the truth concerning any ministry. I am not here to pronounce judgment on any person or ministry. It would be best if you *learned discernment* for yourself.

In this section, I want to take a serious look at what Jesus has to say about this issue. In the next chapter, we will look at what the New Testament writers had to say about this issue as they struggled to keep the early Church on the right track spiritually and doctrinally.

Keep in mind; I started by saying there are true apostles and prophets today. Some denominations and movements have missed God's best by claiming the apostolic and prophetic ministries have been done away with. Others—out of fear of deception or desire to control—severely limit their function, thus rendering them nearly useless. Both responses are wrong. The correct answer is to embrace the true apostolic and prophetic anointing, raise up faithful ministers with these giftings, and hold them accountable to the Body of Christ.

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul describes what has come to be called *The Five-Fold Ministry*: apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher (chapter 4). I find it strange that some denominations teach that apostolic and prophetic gifts are no longer valid for the Church today—that they died out with the first-century Church. Yet, they still believe in the giftings of pastors, teachers, and evangelists. Doesn't this seem odd to you? We might ask a serious question here. Why do they believe that?

I think the answer is somewhat obvious. They understand that the ministry of apostles and prophets has an element of supernatural power and authority attached. They wrongly assume that the other three gifts or anointings do not require the same level of supernatural anointing but can be accomplished through more human efforts.

It seems strange that God would emphasize something in the Bible that was only going to be valid for a very few years and then cause 2000 years of controversy. Doesn't God have more wisdom than that—if indeed you believe all Scripture to be inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16)?

The truth is that Jesus, Paul, and the other apostles warned the Church—in their day and ours—about a significant weapon in the arsenal of demonic principalities and powers: False teaching and false teachers. Let us take a journey through Scripture and examine what warnings and instructions are given to us. This section will tend to focus on the negative scriptures and, lest you get discouraged, I would remind you that these warnings were given over a sixty-year period and are meant totally as instruction for your benefit and success in spiritual warfare. I have no intention of glorifying or exalting demonic powers but rather to expose them and their tactics. Let us dive in.

In Matthew chapter twenty-four, Jesus's disciples ask a three-fold question concerning the end times and His second coming.

Jesus gives a lot of information concerning signs that will occur before His return, but one thing He made crystal clear: those days would be marked by spiritual deception.

We should understand that Jesus gave these instructions as answers to questions about the “last days.” While they are

suitable for any church period, they are particularly vital to you and me, who are alive in this time preceding Christ's return.

Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, "I am the Christ, and will deceive many." Matthew 24:4

Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. Matthew 24:11

Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ! or There do not believe it. For false Christ's and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. Matthew 24:23-25

This last passage carries some serious implications. Jesus indicates that the last days' demonic deception would be so good that even true Christians and ministers might be susceptible.

You and I cannot afford to take this instruction from Jesus lightly. Spiritual pride opens the door to deception. The person who claims, "I will never be deceived," needs to be careful.

There are some safeguards that every Christian can and should put in place to protect themselves. We discussed some of these earlier when I shared the mistakes I made early in my Christian life.

In later chapters, we will discuss some of the false doctrines that are impacting the Church today. For now, we need to consider the nature of these end-time deceptions. Since Jesus said true believers might be deceived, we must assume that they will be religious deceptions. These come in four basic

forms:

1. Occultic practices and animistic (nature worship) religions, including New Age beliefs,
2. False religions (other than Christianity),
3. Christian-based cults, and
4. False doctrines and practices, within mainline Christianity, using the Bible as a source.

Primitive man, seeking to relate to an unseen god or gods, and searching for a source of supernatural power, turned to various types of witchcraft and sorcery in their worship. Satan obliged them, and the occult was born.

Even today, many people, including some Christians, engage in contacting the dead, fortune-telling, and other sorts of occultic practices. Tapping into the occult—even innocently—will shut down your ability to pray and hear from God. Moses warned the Children of Israel against such practices in Deuteronomy 18:9-14.

I have done mission work in several African Countries and the South Pacific. Animism (tribal worship of local spirits in nature) is common: so is witchcraft and even satanism. In Africa, we dealt with Voodoo since Benin, West Africa, was the birthplace of Voodoo.

I was in Nigeria, West Africa, ministering at a Faith Prayer and Tract League conference. A woman came for prayer. She said she could no longer read her Bible or pray. As I ministered to her, the Holy Spirit told me that she had been to see a witch doctor. I asked her if this was true, and she admitted that she had done that. I asked her to renounce it and ask forgiveness. She did, and as I went to place my hand on her forehead to minister deliverance, she started backing up—all the way across the room until she bumped into the

back wall. With nowhere else for her to go, I was finally able to lay my hands on her head and pray. She fell to the floor and was delivered. She came back the next night and testified to how she could read her Bible and pray again.

Satan often uses false religions to snare the world to keep them away from true Christianity. This category would include world religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Spiritism, Humanism, Agnosticism, Atheism, New Age, and others. These are not a significant concern for genuine Christians, so we will not spend any time in this area.

The areas of most concern to Christians would be cults that claim to be Christian and who use the Bible—to some degree—to support their doctrine. These would include the significant cults such as the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science, and a host of lesser-known groups. The thing that distinguishes them as cults, rather than a branch or denomination of Christianity, is usually their doctrine about who Jesus is, how a person is saved, and/or, that salvation can only be found through submission to their ecclesiastical (Church) authority.

I have discovered over many years that when the demonic realm senses that a person is seeking spiritual truth, they often send cult members trying to cut a person off from the truth. The goal (device) is to deflect that spiritual desire and insert false doctrine to keep them from getting saved through faith In Christ.

That happened in my own life and in the lives of many people I have known. This tactic might be likened to giving a person a vaccination to keep them from getting the real disease. The seeker receives just enough Bible—mixed with error—to keep them from getting the real thing. They become religious but are never born again, or they reject the false doctrine and

conclude it was authentic Christianity, and do not peruse the matter further.

The spiritual lies are tied to the cult's authority and cannot be separated from the salvation of the believer. To believe differently, question the leaders, or leave the cult would mean spiritual damnation. Once a person joins this type of cult, it is exceedingly difficult to get out, spiritually, emotionally, and even physically.

The devil also uses this tactic on new Christians and those who do not have a solid Biblical foundation. Cult members are trained to confuse and silence Christians who have little Biblical knowledge. Remember Satan's attempt to use the Bible against Jesus? It must be one of his best weapons.

True Christians are less likely to fall for the Christian cults. However, the next method of attack is the most effective weapon in the demonic arsenal—false doctrine using the Bible as a source. We will discuss some of these doctrines, such as legalism, hyper-grace, universalism, the Jewish Roots Movements, and more in a later chapter.

There is room in the Bible for various interpretations and applications of Scripture. We can allow for *some* disagreement on non-essential doctrines without doing damage to the Gospel or the Christian. We can *agree to disagree* in some areas and still maintain unity and fellowship. However, the main items are non-negotiable. Salvation by faith in Christ. The virgin birth of Jesus. His genuine humanity. The deity of Christ. The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. These, and a few others, are all essential doctrines of genuine Christian faith.

Many times, it is the grey areas that end up causing problems. The further off-target you get, the more room there is for

error. One error will lead to another and another.

Consider someone shooting a gun. If the sights are off the slightest bit, it does not matter if you measure the difference when the bullet leaves the barrel; it is perfect. However, at 10 meters, the difference will be noticeable. It may be off-center a few millimeters. You could be off by centimeters at fifty meters, and at one hundred meters, you might miss the target completely. Such is the nature of spiritual error. A little error, in the beginning, can cause a person to miss the mark of their purpose in God and the fruit they could and should have produced. Consider what Paul says,

I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine, nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith. Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith, from which some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm. 1 Timothy 1:3-7

It is here we find the desired result of true doctrine:

1. Godly edification—or encouragement and training.
2. Love—not self-centeredness.

Notice this love comes *from*:

1. A pure heart—right motive.
2. A good conscience—no deceit or trickery.
3. A sincere faith—nothing fake, no hype in the message.

We also discover that some *strayed* and have *turned away* from this to “idle talk.” To stray means to wander aimlessly until you are lost. A stray dog or cat does not know how to get home. Having strayed, they then take the second step of “turning away.” Straying may have been unintended but turning away is not—it is intentional.

Notice, too, that the ministry becomes talk, not action. The deception becomes the focus of the error. Suddenly it is about believing a specific doctrine, not living out the Gospel, that matters.

Why does this happen? When Christians fail to yield to the power and influence of the Holy Spirit but try to maintain a religious experience, they become influenced and empowered by the flesh. The old sin-nature begins to drive all religious effort. These teachers will tend toward one of two extremes: legalism—emphasizing sin and going back to the Old Testament Law, or Liberalism—doing away with sin entirely and emphasizing the love of God with no judgment. Both are born of the flesh.

We know that the flesh and the Spirit are enemies (John 6:63, Romans 8:1-13, Galatians 5:16-17, Galatians 6:8). Once again, this is a demonic strategy to satisfy the human need for religious experience without God’s Spirit. The secondary purpose is the deception of multitudes by false teachers.

It is important to notice that these people have turned away. That means they were once Christian teachers and leaders but fell into deception and left the true word. Later, those that they taught continued the doctrinal deceptions.

You will also note that they wanted to be recognized as someone special but did not have the Biblical knowledge to be real teachers. This is a clear indication of the desires of the

flesh. James instructed his readers to be careful about rushing to be a teacher. He said teachers (preachers) would be judged with a stricter judgment, because of the potential to lead so many into deception (James 3:1).

Much doctrinal error is the fruit of pride. People want to be teachers. Like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, they loved to make long prayers and be seen of men (Matthew 6:5-8). Often these false teachers want to tell others what to do—without anyone telling them what to do (Luke 11:46). It all boils down to one thing—self! Jesus said, “They have their reward.” They got what they wanted from men and were not going to get anything from God.

I knew a man who wanted to be a teacher and preacher. He thought he was, but he was not experienced nor gifted. He had a hard time getting anyone to let him minister. His solution was to start his own Church where he could be a minister. It did not go well, and a lot of spiritual damage was done. He was a Christian, his heart was to serve God, but his motivation was wrong. He would not wait on God or take instruction from more mature brothers in the Lord. He wanted to be recognized. Rather than being anointed by the Spirit of God, his teaching was dull and often very legalistic. There was no revelation. He just repeated what he heard from others.

Some teachers are false. Their doctrine is wrong, and perhaps their motivation. However, some ministries in the Church are merely immature and fleshly. This does not make them false teachers. Their doctrine and even motivation may be correct, but their level of maturity and submission to the Body of Christ are not. There is no anointing on their ministries. Jesus said, the words I speak are Spirit and life (John 6:36). Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians 3:6:

God, who made us adequate to be servants of a new covenant not based on the letter but on the Spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

On the other hand, false teachers will use Scripture to justify their doctrines and practice. However, the common element is a misinterpretation, misuse, and misapplication of Scripture. They emphasize parts of the Bible without taking the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). This is dangerous.

What is the intent of this section?

[To the intent] that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting.... Ephesians 4:14

CHAPTER 3

APOSTLES AND PROPHETS TRUE AND FALSE

Jesus was clear that spiritual deception would be a significant issue for the end-time Church. Of course, deception has been a major issue all along because it is one of Satan's choice weapons. However, we must be aware that—according to every New Testament writer—this device will be employed in even greater measures as we approach the last days.

Satan tried to stop Jesus at His first coming by killing all the male children in Bethlehem under two years old. He also attacked Jesus before the launch of His public ministry with the temptations in the wilderness. Finally, he turned the hard-hearted religious leaders against Jesus. They broke their own laws and hired false witnesses to accuse Him. Ultimately, they called for His execution—thinking this would put an end to the new movement. Satan failed miserably at every turn.

The devil will try to hinder the end-time Church that will ultimately be a part of his final defeat at Christ's second coming. The Book of the Revelation states that Satan is cast down to earth with great fury because he knows his time is short (Revelation 12:11-12). Some believe this event was in the past, and we are currently fighting this battle throughout the Church Age. Others see a future fulfillment. Either way, deception is a hallmark of the last days and will only get worse as we approach the second coming of our Lord.

I must stop and restate my intent emphatically. I share the content of this chapter for two reasons.

First, it is not to be negative or to exalt the devil and his minions. My goal is to show that Jesus and the other New Testament writers warned their disciples plainly and repeatedly about the nature of the battle they would be fighting. This is basic military intelligence. We need to know and understand the enemy's weapons and tactics, so we can absolutely and completely defeat him once and for all.

Second, I want to impress upon you the seriousness of the threat so you will be on guard against it. There is a tendency to assume that we are smart enough never to be deceived. Of course, this is the first step towards deception. With these thoughts in mind, I want to continue looking at scriptures that warn us to be careful.

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. I Peter 5:8

While this passage can refer to physical suffering and spiritual deception, it tells us a couple of essential things. First, we are to be on guard for the traps. Second that Satan is actively looking for victims so he can catch them unaware. Paul tells us we should not be unaware of the devil's schemes.

But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. 1 Timothy 3:13

As already stated, the deception will get worse as we move toward the second coming of Jesus.

For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan, himself transforms himself into an

angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works. 1 Corinthians 11:13-15

These “ministers” were false and deceitful. Their motive was not just misguided; it was corrupted. They maintained the ministry for the wrong reasons. These motives usually entail one or more of the following issues: finances, power, fame, or control. Others had begun well, but their ministries had gotten off track.

Sometimes developing ministers have a hard time waiting to be released. If you read the verse before the one I quoted, you will discover these false workers wanted to be recognized but did not know what they are talking about—they were not ready yet.

This is a second step towards deception for many young ministers. The ego desires to be recognized. When their leadership feels they are not ready to be released into their own ministries yet, they can open themselves to rebellion and deception.

Finally, you should note two things. They were not *ministers of righteousness*; they only pretended to be. Often these false ministers have hidden sin as well as hidden agendas. They will usually end up being exposed and often cause much damage to those that followed them. They will be rewarded according to their deeds.

These false ministers will usually show their real intent once they get control over people. They will start to teach others to do as they do, so their followers will not criticize them. We see this with the false prophetess Jezebel in the Book of the Revelation, who was teaching the Christians to commit

fornication and worship idols. No doubt, she was doing it herself first.

There was a man I knew who portrayed himself as a Christian. He lived within a block of the church I was pastoring at the time. He was poor and had an old rundown house. One day, as I drove to our church, I noticed he had painted his garage and put up a sign advertising that this was now a church. A short time later, I mentioned this to a mutual acquaintance who related to me that the man had been frustrated with working odd jobs and said, “I know a better way than this to make money.” He started a church and called himself a pastor, so he did not have to have a job. He was in it for the money. The ministry of the Gospel of Jesus is not a job or a source of income. Ministers should be careful that they do not look at the Bride of Christ—the Church—as a means of personal profit. Jesus is a jealous bridegroom, and He will deal with those pastors and leaders who use and abuse His bride.

As I mentioned, many of us love the Church and have invested our lives to protect, nurture, and mature the Body of Christ. To us, it seems impossible that some men would purposely mislead the Church. We could see how people could be mistaken or have different doctrinal ideas than us, but deliberately deceiving people is something else. Yet, we find Paul warning the believers again about this very issue.

They were not just teaching the wrong doctrine out of ignorance. These false workers were planning the deception. Paul calls them cunning and crafty plotters. They had a reason for the deception. There are several motives behind this plotting and scheming. To be sure, the ultimate enemy here is Satan, using these false teachers to hinder the Body of Christ and destroy souls. Yet, these false ministers have their own intended goals. They want control, fame, money, or

power. They like to control others and love the attention they get. They are self-centered and do not care about destroying lives.

Jesus also warned of these false prophets, leaders, and pastors.

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. Matthew 7:15-20

Let us look at this passage closely. First, Jesus said they would look like sheep (true Christians) on the outside, but this was just a camouflage to hide their true nature. They learned to look and talk like Christians. They might even have some good things in their lives. However, their true nature was that of a wolf. The wolf is not there for the benefit of the sheep. He is there for his benefit—lunch! He is there to kill, steal and destroy (John 10:10).

Next, Jesus gave us a clue as to their nature. He said they were like thorns and thistles. There are two main characteristics of thorns and thistles. The first is that they both have sharp spikes that protect them and, if you get close, you will get poked. The second is that they produce no useable fruit. They only produce more thorns and thistles.

It is no accident Jesus characterized them this way. False teachers are very protective of their deception. You cannot get close to them. While they may act like you are their friend,

you will discover that they do not let you into their lives. If you try to get close to them, you will get “poked.” They demand loyalty and get angry when someone questions them. They tend to be distant and exclusive, giving off an air of superiority. These leaders are generally controlling and manipulative. They are not people who are easy to fellowship with, even if they appear friendly at times.

Another trait of the *thistle ministry* is that they like to have all relationships centered in themselves. They often work to put a distance between others under their influence. Usually, this takes the form of putting others down while making you feel you have more of a privileged or *insider* position. The goal is to keep their followers from getting too close to each other. That stops people from getting together and talking about real issues concerning the leader.

The second characteristic Jesus gave was fruitlessness—at least fruit that counts for eternal life (John 4:36). Bad leaders do not produce good (spiritual) fruit. They reproduce themselves. Jesus said we should look carefully at the fruit of a ministry to determine the source. There are three areas of spiritual fruit we should consider.

1. The Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control). How is the character of the leader? Does he or she have these qualities? Are they growing and becoming more prominent?
2. Salvation: Are people genuinely getting born again, or are they just becoming religious? Every healthy living thing reproduces itself. Faithful ministries will produce new Christians. Can you see this happening? A claim to prophetic revelation, visions, and supposed spiritual signs

mean nothing if people are not being saved and growing in Christ.

3. Spiritual maturity in their followers is a sign of genuine ministers. We should see their followers growing in love, humility, patience, and grace. Is the nature of Jesus developing in the congregation? Are they maturing as a church? What about the other leaders in the Church? Since we all reproduce after our kind, we can look at the *sons and daughters* of a ministry to see what kind of leaders they are producing. One person might be able to fool people, but it will be hard to hide harmful patterns in several people.

The title of this chapter is Apostles and Prophets—The True and the False. Highlighting the false does not negate the true. If there were no true prophets and apostles, there would be no need to warn of the false since everyone claiming to be an apostle or prophet would be fake. The fake only validates the fact there are real anointed ministries of God today. Some have erred on the other side. They reject everyone who claims to be operating in the power of the Holy Spirit. These people are deceived on the opposite side of the issue. Either way, the power of God is hindered, and people are denied the life-giving flow of the Spirit.

That leaves us trying to figure out how to tell the true from the false. If the characteristics of false ministers are listed above, then the opposite must be true of genuine, Holy Spirit-filled ministers.

One of the hardest things for the devil to fake is genuine self-sacrificing love. In fact, I do not think he can mimic true love. This is one key fruit to look for. Genuine leaders will be approachable. You can question them. They have a level of transparency in their lives. They are not secretive and closed

off. They will not always be trying to protect themselves and their positions. These leaders will work hard at encouraging Christian growth. They are known for discipling the Church, and training and releasing leaders. They will equip the Body to find their gifts and provide a safe place for them to use those gifts in a local Church context. If you examine the fruit of genuine ministries, you will discover people being saved, discipled, and released into ministry

As the title of this book suggests, we are to “test the spirits, to see if they are from God.” If someone does not know what a substance is, they send it to a laboratory to run tests to determine its makeup. Likewise, we must apply some spiritual tests to the spirits operating in our midst.

Fortunately, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is the discerning of spirits. Along with this gift, we can also apply some other tests to determine if the message, power, or practice being presented is of God or not. We will look at several spiritual tests in a later chapter. First, we need to look at an important—and troubling passage of Scripture found in Second Thessalonians.

CHAPTER 4

WARNINGS OF DECEPTION AND APOSTACY

Paul warns the believers in Thessalonica about the coming great deception. It is well worth our time to listen to, understand, and heed this warning.

Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion,

that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

The early Church had to be on guard against false doctrines constantly. A new doctrine was spreading. The lie was that the Lord had already come back. According to these false teachers, there was no future *second coming* in which to place your hope. Believers in Thessalonica were “shaken and troubled.” Those presenting this lie were using Paul’s reputation. Perhaps even writing letters in his name.

Rather than look at the lie specifically, we want to focus on what Paul has to say about the enemy’s nature, strategy, and the battle they were facing. Here are the critical parts:

1. Let no man deceive you—a repeated warning.
2. Our enemy opposes all that is called God. Remember that “Christ” means *anointed*, so the anti-Christ is the *anti-anointing*. So, he opposes God, Jesus, the Church, ministries, and individual Christians—anything operating with the Spirit of God.
3. The goal of the demonic spirits behind false doctrine is that someone other than God is worshipped. He sets himself up in the temple of God. While some have taken this literally—as in a physical temple—we cannot overlook the fact that God has a temple today. It is called the Church of the Living God. Peter reminds the Church that they are *living stones* being built into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:4-10). The devil wants to set himself up in the Church to divert the true worship of God. Few people would think to look inside what calls itself “the church” to find the devil. Yet

this is the perfect place to hide and launch attacks from within. Jesus warned of *prophets* coming to the disciples as wolves in sheep's clothing.

4. This end-time deception would come with power and lying wonders. Although demonically powered, there would be an element of the supernatural to it—counterfeiting the Holy Spirit's genuine gifts. Just because something has power does not mean God is the source. We must discern deeper than what we can see. Do not be fooled. Also, do not make the mistake of rejecting everything supernatural as false. We must learn to discern from a spiritual level, not a fleshly level.
5. There would be unrighteous deception.
6. God would send a strong delusion to the people who did not love the truth. (We need to take a closer look at this unsettling scripture in a minute and figure out what it means.)
7. Those that believed the lie would perish.

The intent of this warning is clear. An epic battle of true and false—light and dark—would characterize the last days. The believers at Thessalonica were already experiencing this warfare. It was part of Satan's strategy to get them to lose hope. Paul warns the Christians to expect Satan to try to infiltrate the Church. His goal would be to insert false teachers and false doctrines. We should not ignore this warning. These false preachers and teachers would even be doing miraculous things to get attention and prove they had spiritual power.

Understand this—just because someone is operating in spiritual power or supposedly has supernatural manifestations in their ministry does not automatically mean they are serving God or telling the truth. This passage warns

us not to simply accept the supernatural as proof a person or message is from God. The title of this book is *Test the Spirits*. If no false spirits were operating in supernatural power, there would have been no need for the warning. In a later chapter, we will look at several ways to test the spirit behind a teacher or teaching.

Paul warns that false teaching often comes with unrighteousness. We find evidence of this in the Book of the Revelation. Jesus rebuked several churches for allowing false apostles and prophets to teach unrighteousness—including fornication and idolatry (Revelation 2:14-15, 2:20-22). False teachers are not walking with God, so they have no conscience and are not listening to the Holy Spirit in their lives. It is nothing for them to sin and to use their positions and supposed authority to make a profit from the Church and to manipulate and use the people of God for their own purposes. The deception they are under works to justify their deeds in their minds since it sears their consciences.

This recalls Paul's warning that there would be those who thought "godliness was a way of gain" (1 Timothy 6:5-6). They reasoned that if they were prospering financially, God must be happy with them—even if it meant deceiving the Church. Paul instructs us to withdraw from such people.

As people move away from God, one of the first things to go is holiness.

By encouraging sin in the Church, false prophets and teachers placed the people in bondage and slowly cut them off from God's Spirit.

Now we need to take a serious look at Paul's statement that God Himself would send strong delusion to some people in the last days. This seems to be an extraordinary statement

indeed. Why would God cause people to be deceived and believe the lie? Isn't God totally into truth? Isn't He opposed to every lie? We need to sift through this passage carefully.

The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

We need to look at the three reasons Paul gives for God's extreme action:

1. They did not receive the love the truth.
2. They did not believe the truth.
3. They had pleasure in unrighteousness.

We need to understand that God did not send the lie—He cannot lie. The lie came from Satan. You might also take notice that the word *lie* is singular, not plural. It is not a lot of lies, but rather the lie. Jesus is THE TRUTH. Everything opposed to Him is a lie. Jesus is the Christ (anointed), and Satan is the antichrist (against the anointing). We understand there may well be a person in the future who manifests this antichrist spirit on earth. However, the apostles warned there were already many antichrists at work in the word in the first century.

Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. 1 John 2:18

We cannot afford to look for a future antichrist and ignore the fact that many in the Church oppose the anointing of God right now. Think of the religious denominations and church groups you know who deny the Holy Spirit's power and the gifts of the Spirit operating in the Church today. When the religious leaders were angry with Jesus, they said He cast out devils by the chief demon's power (Matthew 12:24-32). Jesus went on to warn them that attributing the power of the Holy Spirit of God to demons was blasphemy.

This is not to say that everyone in a church system that denies the Holy Spirit's power and the gifts of the Spirit today are antichrists. Paul claims that he was a blasphemer but obtained mercy because he did it in ignorance (1 Timothy 1:13). Likewise, many in those church systems have ignorantly followed their leader's teaching because they have never heard the truth. However, those who know the truth and do not want to submit to the Holy Spirit's leadership in their lives are accountable. Consider the religious leaders of Jesus's day. Many knew the truth and refused to submit to Him because it would cost them too much.

Christ is not a name; it is a title. When we say Jesus Christ, we are literally saying Jesus, The Anointed One. The antichrist spirit opposes the Christ—not just the person of Jesus but also the anointing of the Holy Spirit within the Church. It opposes us as *Christians* (meaning little Christs, or little anointed ones) who are operating in the power of the Holy Spirit.

While God does not send the lie, He does send the delusion or the blindness that causes someone to believe the lie. We might immediately be offended at this. How could God do such a thing? How could he cause people to believe the lie when He is about truth and righteousness? This whole idea seems strangely out of character with God. However, if you

look at the reasons Paul gives, it becomes clear.

The apostle says they did not *receive* the love of the truth. The word *receive* means to accept into fellowship and embrace or accept. In other words, those who were being deceived had heard the truth and rejected it. There was no love of the truth in them. This delusion sealed a fate they had already chosen. This is the result of demonic deception. It was keeping people from accepting the truth. The only other option is to believe the lie.

Since Jesus is ultimately the truth (John 14:6; Ephesians 4:21), they did not receive or love Him. In John chapter one, we are told,

He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name...

Loving the truth means loving and receiving Jesus as well. The deluded ones had heard and rejected the truth of the Gospel in Jesus. They made the decision. God only sealed that decision.

One way to protect ourselves from demonic deception is to develop a love for the truth—even if it confronts us and makes us uncomfortable. We must also humble ourselves and be willing to adjust our theology and practice as the Holy Spirit brings us revelation. While we should not chase “every wind of doctrine.” we do need to carefully explore new ideas and different ways of looking at and interpreting scripture. We must always depend on the Holy Spirit to keep us in the truth.

Over the past forty years, I have had to change several doctrinal points I was taught initially. I was born again in 1980 through the ministry of a Fundamental, Independent

Baptist Church.

While they believed in salvation and practiced evangelism, they tended to be very legalistic. They believed that the Baptism with the Holy Spirit was false doctrine and anyone who spoke in tongues was worshipping the devil.

I believed what they taught me. In turn, I taught others what I had been taught. Then one day the Lord started speaking to me. I wanted more. I was dissatisfied with my Christian life and thought, “There has to be more to Christianity than what I am experiencing.”

I had good fundamental doctrine. I was a member of the Church. I spent my Thursday nights praying for the lost and going door to door doing visitation for my Church. I was growing in the Lord in many ways, yet I knew something was missing.

God was using that hunger to open my heart, soul, and mind to the reality of the Baptism with the Holy Spirit. God was preparing me for the next phase in my Christian life.

Soon after this, I was given some anointed sermons on the Baptism with the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. The Spirit of God pierced my heart and broke through the false teaching I had received from the people who led me to the Lord. I faced a problem. Accepting the truth meant I was going to be rejected by the people in my church fellowship. It would cost me something to follow the Spirit and be baptized with the Holy Ghost.

What would it cost you to walk in the truth God is revealing to your heart right now?

I did love the truth, and I was baptized with the Holy Spirit in just a couple of weeks. I spoke with tongues for the first time

on the evening of January 4, 1983, and I have been speaking in tongues ever since then. I did end up getting kicked out of the Baptist church I was attending. I received the left foot of fellowship, as it has been called. It did release me to go full steam ahead into the things of the Spirit.

As I walked in this new truth and experience—which I had previously rejected—I was confronted with another thought. My Baptist friends had been wrong about the Baptism with the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. I wondered if they were wrong about other things as well.

I determined to allow God to sort through my doctrinal beliefs and correct anything that was wrong. At that time, I received a love of the truth—even if it meant changing some strong beliefs that had become a part of my Christian life. I remember praying very specifically. As I poured my heart out to God I said, “Father, I am willing to lay down everything I have been taught, if you will keep me in the truth.” I did not believe I would have to change everything of course, but I knew that there might be some things that God would have to challenge and change. I did trust Him to lead and guide me and keep me from being deceived. I have prayed that same prayer three times in forty years.

Over the past forty years, God has continued to shape my theology as I prayed, studied, and taught the Bible in various settings. While the fundamental doctrines I learned as a Baptist did not change much, I have some radically different views on a few things now. I still trust God to keep me in the truth as I continue to study and seek God.

The last thing we need to look at from the passage in Second Thessalonians is the delusion’s final cause. “*They had pleasure in unrighteousness.*”

Some of these people had never been born again. Others had been, but their lives never changed—even if they called themselves religious people. It is one thing for a Christian to struggle with sin and hate it. It is another to take pleasure in unrighteousness.

There are many people today claiming to be Christians who approve of unrighteousness. They condone that which the Bible condemns. Isaiah prophesies distress against those that “*call good evil and evil good*” (Isaiah 5:20). This is a serious issue, and a telltale mark of those who open themselves for deception.

The solution, of course, is to receive the love of the truth and allow that love to transform us. If I must *receive* something, it is a sure indication I do not already have it.

Humanity was born into sin. They were also born into and raised in a world system that is opposed to God. James tells us, “Friendship with the world is enmity against God” (4:4). This fellowship with the world means we approve of the way the world operates and do the same things.

A human being’s default position is not as a child of God, but rather as a member of the world. The longer a person stays in the world system before they get saved, the more ingrained they become in the world’s way of doing things. We must set aside money, politics, deceit, and other worldly tools to operate in God’s Kingdom. God told the Israelites,

My ways are not your ways, and My thoughts are not your thoughts. My thoughts and ways are higher than yours (Isaiah 55:8-9).

There are the ways God thinks and the ways man thinks. They are not the same—which is why we are told to “*Be transformed by the renewing of your mind*” (Romans 12:2).

TEST THE SPIRITS

It is tough to break fellowship with the way of the world once you have been trained to operate in it. Yet this fellowship is the very thing that keeps us from loving the truth.

CHAPTER 5

FOUR KINDS OF SPIRITS

**“And you have tested those who say they are
apostles and are not,
and have found them liars....”**

The Book of the Revelation 2:3

We should understand a thing or two about various spirits.
Four kinds of spirits can and need to be discerned.

1. The Holy Spirit of God, who stands alone from all the others.
2. Human spirits. Every person has a spirit being, or perhaps more precisely, every person IS a spirit being (1 Thessalonians 5:23). I love the quote from Teilhard de Chardin, who said, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.” Many misconceptions can be avoided by understanding this concept.
3. Angelic spirits that serve God and humans (“*Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation?*” Hebrews 1:14)
4. Demonic spirits.

Each of these spirits operate in the world today.

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is God. He is a person, not a force or power. The Spirit of God always glorifies Jesus. The Holy Spirit is

HOLY. He is not going to be promoting doctrines, practices, and experiences that are not holy.

When self-proclaimed teachers condon and teach immorality or idolatry, you can be sure the Holy Spirit is not empowering them. The Bible tells us there are some well-defined ways the Holy Spirit moves in the Church. These include the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12), the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and the various ministry gifts (Romans 12:4-8 and Ephesians 4:11-12).

The Human Spirit

Human spirits cannot perform miracles. However, the human spirit has a great intellect and a capacity for good or bad. Some deception comes from the human spirit.

Some well-intentioned people who want to do good but do not know Jesus go about doing good things in their own strength and ability. However, the human spirit cannot produce Godly fruit apart from the Holy Spirit.

In John chapter fifteen, Jesus utters those famous words, “*Without Me, you can do nothing.*” Of course, humans can do a lot without Jesus—but there is no eternal or spiritual value produced. At best, it is a temporary good based in this worldly existence, and that shall burn one day.

Paul explained this spiritual reality in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15. He said each man’s work was of a certain type. There were gold, silver, and precious stones, and there were wood hay and stubble. He also said that the judgment would prove which type each person’s works were.

Wood, hay, and stubble are produced regularly by the earth. On the other hand, gold, silver, and precious stones are made eternally by God. Over the centuries, men have tried to create

gold and silver from different materials, such as lead. Alchemy was a mixture of science and occult practice. No one has ever succeeded in producing a man-made gold or silver. Likewise, artificial gems have a fraction of the value of genuine stones. Precious metals and jewels are things that only God can create.

Fire reduces large piles of wood, hay, and stubble to nothing. Likewise, the works produced by the flesh—no matter how many there are or how much others praise them—will be reduced to ash in the Day of Judgment.

On the other hand, fire refines gold and silver and makes them more valuable. The same fire of judgment will burn the dross (impurities) out of real spiritual works, and they will become of great honor and value, which will be rewarded richly in eternity.

Human intellect and passion can do great things, but only that which the Holy Spirit powers has eternal worth. We need to discern these things in our ministry and the ministry of others.

Angelic Spirits

Angles are created beings tasked with serving God and Christians who are called “the heirs of salvation.” The writer of Hebrews says when speaking of angels, “*Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?*” Angels are ministering spirits.

The word *minister* is the same word used for minister or deacon in the Bible and the Church today. It was someone who served others. The word means “to run errands.”

According to the Bible, angels are here to serve us as we serve the purposes of God. The writer of Hebrews tells us that

angels are a different class of being. Humans are “a *little lower than the angels*” because we have physical bodies that can suffer death (Hebrews 2:7-9).

Jesus experienced this during His great spiritual trial in the Garden of Gethsemane. We are told the angels came and ministered to him.

The angelic realm has an order and hierarchy of command. There are at least three archangels mentioned in the Bible (Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael). The Book of Enoch, referred to by Jude in the New Testament, lists ten archangels by name. Lucifer was an archangel—perhaps the highest of them all—before his fall.

The Angelic realm seems to be divided into geographical regions with chains of command, much like an army.

Demonic Spirits

Demons are fallen angels. They were created good and perfect but chose to follow Satan in his rebellion against Jehovah God. Jude tells us about these beings.

The angels who did not keep their proper domain but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day.... Jude 1:6

Demons live in the same realm and have the same power and characteristics as the holy angels. They serve Satan just as the holy angels serve God. The angelic realm is at war, with both sides fighting for the souls of men.

And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for

them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. The Revelation 12:7-9

Paul tells us that Satan is “*the prince of the power of the air*” (Ephesians 2:2). His dwelling place is not in hell—it is on the earth. The pictures of the devil—in a red suit with horns and a pitchfork, sitting on a throne in the flames of hell—are not Biblical.

He is at work in what the Bible calls the power of the present age. These are the financial, political, and philosophical realms of the world created by men’s corruption. The Bible calls them the “kingdoms of this world.” One day all of them will become the “*Kingdom of our God and His Christ*” (The Revelation 11:15).

The demons operate much like the angels with a hierarchy of power and geographical territories. Sometimes we say, the devil is attacking me today. The truth is that the devil is not omnipresent—he cannot be everywhere at once. He does, however, have legions of fallen angels that obey him and facilitate his schemes and plans to war against God and His Church.

God gave the church power over Satan and his demons. Our weapons are the name of Jesus, the blood of Jesus, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and our testimony. John tells us in the Book of the Revelation,

But they overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives so much that they were afraid to die. (The Book of the Revelation 12:11).

John tells us, “*Greater is He that is you, than he that is in the world*” (1 John 4:4). Of course, Jesus gave His disciples power over the demons to cast them out.

The Church of Jesus Christ should not be intimidated by the demonic realm. The apostle John tells us, “*For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil*” (1 John 3:8). We are co-laborers together with God and have been given the responsibility, right and privilege of administering the Kingdom of God and the defeat and destruction of the devil and his angels.

CHAPTER 6

THIS PRESENT DARKNESS

Another area of deception must be considered and understood if we are to win the spiritual battle for souls effectively. That is the secular—or worldly—deception that Satan and his demons cast upon the world that does not know God. The Bible calls this deception *darkness*.

We can easily define spiritual darkness as a lack of revelation and understanding of God and His Kingdom. Spiritual darkness seeks to hide the righteousness of God—as well as His eternal plans and purposes. It prevails in the world systems. This darkness prevents men and women from seeking God and His plan for their lives. Without a working knowledge of God, they are left to try to control the systems of the world through the flesh, sinful motives and actions, and even demonic power.

Religion (without the Spirit of God) has played a huge role in this effort to control things. Over the centuries, some, claiming to represent God, have done atrocious things in the name of religion. Wars, Inquisitions, murder, financial scams, and more have all been done in the name of God. We must insist that the people who do these things in God's name do not know Him—or He, them.

Jesus said that many would come in His name and claim to do great religious works. Despite all their claims of doing things in His name, He will say to them, depart from me you who work iniquity, I never knew you. Wow. Let us back up a second. First, Jesus used the word many—meaning, not a few.

Then He made two other significant statements. He called them “workers of iniquity.” Iniquity means *lawlessness*. An easier way to look at this is the say they were self-willed. They claimed to be doing God’s will, but Jesus made it clear they were doing their own will in His name. The last thing to note is Jesus saying, “I never knew you.” They thought they knew God, but God did not know them.

Paul must have had the words of Jesus in mind when He penned these words to Timothy.

Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: “The Lord knows those who are His,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.” 2 Timothy 2:18-19

God does not use the flesh or any ungodly methods to promote His righteous Kingdom. These things come from demonic darkness.

The first thing God spoke into existence was light. However, He did not create the sun until the fourth day. What was the light God created in the beginning? Was it physical light, or perhaps spiritual light? Was it a demonstration of His power, or was it a revelation of Himself? Was it the illumination of the universe or the universal declaration of the defeat of darkness? In the Book of the Revelation, John tells us there is no need for sun and moon (physical light) in the new heaven and earth because the glory of God and the Lamb is the light source. Carefully consider the implication of these two verses in the context of our discussion.

For it is God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 2 Cor. 4:6

The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light.... The Book of the Revelation 21:3-4a

To this train of thought, we could add what John tells us about Jesus in the first chapter of his Gospel. Jesus was the word of God, and through Him, God created everything. John also said Jesus was the light of the world. Jesus said, if anyone follows Me, he will not walk in darkness (John 8:12). There is a spiritual light that does not need a physical source, such as the sun.

The darkness we are referring to includes the religious deception we have been discussing but is far greater. It also encompasses the economic, philosophical, social, educational, and political ideologies that operate in the realm the Bible calls *the world*. We could describe it as a secular worldview as opposed to a Biblical worldview. Secular is defined, in part, this way: “denoting attitudes, activities, or other things that have no religious or spiritual basis....” (The Oxford Dictionary).

These two world views are opposites. Secular worldview—at best—simply does not want to acknowledge God and—at worst—actively fights against God. It makes no difference if the darkness is passive (we do not recognize the existence or relevance of any god or gods) or antagonistic (we believe in God and hate everything He stands for). The result is the same: Those in darkness deny God His rightful place in the lives of His creation. The end goal is to defeat the eternal purpose of God in the lives of those He loves.

On the other hand, the biblical worldview encompasses what God has revealed about Himself and his purposes through the Bible. It acknowledges God’s role and rights as the creator

and His claims to rule uncontested and judge with a righteous and final judgment. A Biblical worldview would also include humanity's important role in cooperating with God in fulfilling His eternal purposes on earth and in the universe.

The principalities and powers in the demonic realm are actively opposed to God and His purposes. However, that does not mean that every person with a secular worldview is demonically motivated. Many are simply deceived by the worldly darkness that exists. This is one of the strategic goals of the demonic principalities and powers that wage war in the unseen realms.

The reality of this spiritual darkness explains the all-out attack on the authenticity and authority of the Bible. In another chapter, we looked at this attack in greater depth. Suffice it to say; if God has not spoken, there is no basis for faith (Romans 10:17). Without faith, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Suppose Satan can undermine the authenticity and authority of the Bible in the minds of people. In that case, he effectively wins the battle unless light (revelation) from the Holy Spirit overcomes the spiritual darkness. That revelation comes because of Spirit-empowered prayer and evangelism on the part of the Church.

I want to drop in an important side note here. God is not opposed to the earth. The earth and its fulness belong to God. The term *the world* refers to the secular, man-made systems that control people. Biblically speaking, the earth and the world are not the same thing and should not be confused.

Some evangelicals have ceded the earth to Satan because of false theology. It sounds like this, "This world is not my home; I am just passing through." That sounds spiritual, but is it? God created the earth for Adam and gave him authority over it to "dress it and keep it." Adam was given dominion over the

animals. It was through Adam's sin that Satan obtained a temporary controlling interest in the secular world. God never rescinded humanity's right to manage the earth and set up a Godly society, but instead, man forfeited it. When Jesus was on earth, He had complete authority over the natural world. He walked on water, multiplied food, calmed raging storms, healed disease, and raised the dead. Jesus passed this mandate to His followers who, according to Jesus, will do even more and greater things through the power of the Holy Spirit. Your assignment as a Spirit-filled Christian is to be like Jesus in every way.

The apostle John spoke much of this world. He was referring to the secular worldview propagated by both demonic and humanistic ideologies. He said, do not love the world nor the things that pertain to the world. He went on to say that if we loved the [things of the] world, the love of God is not in us (1 John 2:15). He stated that the whole world lies under the influence of Satan (1 John 5:19). He reminded us that greater is the Holy Spirit in us than the devil who usurps authority in the world (1 John 4:4). Jesus said that He had "overcome the world" (John 16:33). Paul called Satan the "*god of this age*" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4) and "the prince of the power of the air." (Ephesians 2:2).

Could it be that many in the Church still love the world so much that it hinders their effectiveness in the Kingdom of God?

Paul sums it up this way:

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the

lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. Ephesians 2:1-3

Paul uses the phrase “the course of this world.” He also said there was a demonic power behind this course or path that the world takes. There is a demonic spirit at work in the “sons of disobedience.” This phrase indicates a specific group of unpersuadable people—they have made up their mind and refuse any other reasoning.

Furthermore, the demonic powers and the course of this world are directly associated with the sins of the flesh. In other words, demonic forces promote ideologies and systems that influence the ebb and flow of the world and are designed to appeal to and empower humanity’s sinful nature. The demonic spirits behind these world systems have two key strategies. The first is deceiving humanity and getting them to buy into (or maintain) a secular worldview. The second is empowering certain people (the sons of disobedience) to do their will and propagate the systems that keep the world in bondage. These, and other strategies, have the goal of undermining God’s eternal purposes by keeping people ignorant of or hostile to God.

Peter agrees with Paul about the *behind-the-scenes* nature of our real struggle.

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. 2 Peter 1:2-4

Reading backward here, Peter reveals that this world's corruption is caused by the lust of men (enticed and empowered by the demonic realm). He also explains that the solution to this universal issue is God's promises to His people in the Bible. Everything we need to live a Godly life has already been provided for us by God. We should not just think in terms of material things—like food, shelter, clothing, and money—but rather in a holistic way. John prayed that his readers would prosper and be in health, even as their souls prospered (3 John 1:2). For John, soul prosperity paved the way for mental and physical prosperity.

Then Peter makes an incredible statement? “You are partakers of the divine nature.” The word partakers in Greek comes from the same word as *communion*. We are partners in the divine nature. We appropriate and share the divine nature. When we appropriate the promises of God, we become like Him.

Peter explains that access to these spiritual resources was through “the exceedingly great and precious promises of God.” In other words, overcoming the prince of the power of the air, the course of this world, and the lust that drives it all, is found in appropriating God's promises. We do this through faith and obedience. Prayer and faith are not just about getting our needs met. Our divine purpose is carefully wrapped in this process of having a need, hearing God's promises, exerting our faith in His word, persevering in the face of opposition and delay, and finally, becoming more like Christ.

It is safe to say God works in us before He works for us or through us. The result of this process is three-fold. First, we get the thing we need or want. Second—and perhaps more importantly—we obtain glory and virtue as we are transformed into the image of Christ in the journey. The third

result is that we escape the corruption of the world as the lust in our soul is broken by the Spirit of God.

We cannot simply say, ‘you need to quit sinning.’ Although we should be conquering sin in our lives, there is a process that breaks the pull and allure of the world in our lives. We can use willpower for a time, but if we do not break the power of lust, we will circle back to the same old things repeatedly. The proverb about a dog returning to his vomit is appropriate here.

And the first shall be last. Peter starts this passage by telling us that peace and grace are multiplied to us through the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ. This is the light that the devil and his kingdom fight against. He fights to keep the light from the lost so they will never be saved. He fights to keep the light from Christians to hinder grace and peace from flowing in the lives of billions of believers, conforming them to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).

Paul agrees with this principle when he tells us that we are transformed through the renewing of our mind (12:2). If we do not allow the Word of God to change the way we think, we will never change our behavior long-term. Contrary to popular belief, the word repentance does not mean to quit sinning. It means to change our way of thinking (and your life will change as a result). This is the principle Paul was advocating.

The world is opposed to God and God to the world. The Bible indicates that Satan and his demonic principalities and powers govern the world and its systems. They have influenced men throughout the ages and in various geographical regions of the world with ungodly powers, motives, and thinking.

The atheistic political systems of the world come in several forms. The humanists simply think humanity is smart enough and reasonable enough to solve our problems without religion. They claim man is fundamentally good, and if we can get rid of those institutions that divide us—especially religion—we will suddenly hold hands and start loving each other. Human reason will prevail, and we will end war, ignorance, and poverty. Yeah, good luck with that. Simply look at countries that have humanistic governments today. It does not work.

In the twentieth century alone, various forms of communism sought to eliminate the knowledge of God and killed hundreds of millions of people in the process of trying to create their Godless systems of social equality. The Russian communists killed over one hundred million people. Chinese communists killed forty-five million. Pol Pot in Cambodia killed two million of His countrymen. North Korea is estimated to have murdered one million, six hundred thousand people (perhaps twice that many).

Nazi Germany, under Hitler, systematically murdered six million Jews and tens of thousands of other Europeans in their concentration camps. These figures do not even consider the death tolls from two world wars, Korea, Viet Nam and countless regional and ethnic conflicts in Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

The sad truth is that humanity—apart from God—does not have the moral ability to rise above the sin and darkness we are born into. This is the world in which we live, and the world God offers to deliver us from through faith in our Savior Jesus Christ.

Jesus states that He came as a light to the darkness, but men love darkness more than light and rejected Him (John3:19).

He also said that whoever believes in Him would not live in darkness (John 12:46). Paul told the Christians in Colossae that they had been delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the Kingdom of Christ (Colossians 1:13).

Once again, we see there is spiritual power behind this spiritual darkness. The hard truth is that every person is born into sin and spiritual darkness. That is the default condition of humanity. Each person's darkened soul requires the Spirit of God to bring the light of revelation to be set free.

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 4:6

Paul explains that Christians have a significant part to play in this dark-to-light journey in the lives of the lost.

But even if our Gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. 2 Corinthians 4:3-4

Satan is the *god of this world*, and he blinds people with darkness so they cannot see God's glorious light. As mentioned, this is the default condition of humankind. In one sense, Satan has the advantage. Mankind is born spiritually blind and dead. He simply needs to work to keep them from the light. He perpetuates that blindness on people in many ways.

For many, they simply grow up in the ways of the world and never think anything different. Sins such as lust, greed, and the desire for power or control keep many from ever thinking

about God because they do not want to give up their besetting sins. Remember, the demonic forces behind the world systems play to the lusts of men.

Others, who might be more inclined to religion, are offered a false version. The many religions and cults are simply the devil's smokescreen to keep people from the truth. Even those who would lean toward Christianity are not exempt. Many false doctrines, as well as entire cults, use the Bible. However, like Satan, they twist and misapply the scripture—as we have seen throughout this book. It worked with Adam and the Jewish nation so much that Satan even tried twisting scripture on Jesus when He tempted him in the wilderness. Peter warns of this tendency.

Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. 2 Peter 3:15b-16

It is untrained and unstable people who twist the scriptures. The word *twist* carries an interesting word picture. Figuratively it meant to torture someone by placing them on the rack. The rack was designed to stretch people and pull them apart. The rack's victims had their arms and legs were tied to different boards, and a crank was turned to pull the boards apart. The more the cranked rotated, the more pull is exerted on the arm and leg joints until they were pulled out of the socket, tearing ligaments and muscles until they were useless. This word picture gives an idea of someone distorting the truth by stretching it out of proportion until it was beyond spiritual value. At the risk of repeating myself, I have to say, when I listen to some current preachers, I wonder if they have

even read the Bible.

Satan's religious strategy is akin to giving someone a vaccination to keep them from getting the real disease. People get enough false religion to keep them from ever looking for the truth in Jesus Christ. In this way, Satan continues to foster the darkness people are born with.

Billions of people have grown up in cultures that know nothing about Christ. They follow the religion of their culture, be it Islam (1.8 billion), animism (400 million), Buddhism (448 million), Hinduism (950 million), or any other 'ism.' Satan's strategy was to control the culture and provide a false religious experience to effectively keep the Gospel from people.

Blaise Pascal, a seventeenth-century Christian, physicist mathematician, religious philosopher, and poet, said that every person had a God-shaped hole in them and that nothing, but God could fill that hole. In the absence of spiritual light, humanity's typical drive to fill the religious void will cause a person to seek a religious experience. Without the Gospel message, Satan finds the freedom to insert whatever false religious concept he desires.

It requires the power of the Holy Spirit to penetrate the demonic forces behind these religions.

The *Prince of Persia* still holds sway in the Middle East and other Muslim countries. That demonic power did not cease to exist when Persia stopped being the dominant world power. We can also assume a Prince of India, or China, or the USA, with their corresponding downline of demonic authorities. Each of these will have its own civic, cultural, and religious ideologies depending on who was instrumental in developing the societies in the beginning.

Of course, it is difficult for individuals and even small organizations to make much of an inroad against these tremendous demonic world views. Only when the Church turns its collective effort to focus on these principalities and powers will the darkness be broken, and multitudes brought to faith in Christ.

Currently, we are seeing a tremendous move of God in the Muslim world. Stories of Muslims having dreams of a man in white calling them to follow Him are numerous. Reports indicate that Iran has the fastest-growing Christian population in the world. Why is this? Did this just suddenly happen? Or was there something behind this spiritual ingathering we do not often consider?

In 1990 the CEO of Partners International, Luis Bush, coined the phrase 10/40 window. It indicated the geography of the world between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator. This part of the world held the largest amount of unreached people groups, such as the ones mentioned above. For several years, the Church was encouraged to pray for the 10/40 window—with few tangible results. Ten years later, we began getting reports of miraculous encounters Muslims were having. In 2017 it was estimated that six million Muslims are converting to Christianity every year, which is about twelve per minute. Obviously that number is growing in 2021. The power of united prayer across denominational lines was finally able to pierce the darkness and allow for a miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit—but it took a concerted effort over time.

Let's go back to the demonic strategy for a minute. Others have left the Church, wounded by so-called Christians and clergy who used and abused them. Effectively they are blinded to the truth, considering their experience to be the only valid one. They associate bad religion with a bad God and want nothing to do with it anymore.

With some, Satan uses drugs, alcohol, sex abuse, and other traumatic experiences to shut people down. Often, he whispers, “It’s all God’s fault.”

One thing that shocks and saddens me is the amount of anger that seethes in our younger generation, especially in America. We have a massive percentage of pre-teens that are so angry they need counseling, and depression among teens is skyrocketing. The teen suicide rate in the USA has gone up over 50% in the last decade.

This is a spiritual problem, not just a psychological one. Satan uses the hopelessness young people see in the world to kill them before they get the life-changing gospel message.

We must get the power of the Gospel to this generation. It is not in the modern cookies-and-Kool aid youth programs that are so prominent in the Church today. We find it in a power encounter with the Holy Spirit—the Baptism with the Holy Spirit. Real salvation, the power of the Spirit, and Biblical discipleship are necessary to save the next generation of the Church from falling into the spiritual darkness waging intense war against them.

The first responsibility of evangelism is not sharing the Gospel, it is praying against the darkness that blinds people’s minds. It is coming against the demonic principalities and powers that control geographical regions, the world systems they influence, and the people that are blinded. Specifically, we need to pray for individuals to see through the darkness of this world and accept the light of God.

I once spent over an hour explaining the gospel story in detail to a man who said he wanted to hear. I went through the Bible stories, explained sin and death, shared how and why Jesus died to save us. When I finished, he simply said, “I just don’t

SEE it.” I had not yet broken the demonic strongholds that existed in his mind. I am pleased to say he did make a profession of faith years later, shortly before his death.

Paul specifically prayed this very thing for the Ephesian Church—and no doubt all the churches He worked with.

... making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened. (Ephesians 1:17-18).

We will be much more effective in evangelism if we can identify and deal with the demonic powers and lies that keep individuals, geographical regions, and entire people groups blinded to spiritual truth. I am not suggesting we run to extremes like some in the charismatic and prophetic movements have done, calling everything a Jezebel, Python, or Leviathan spirit. While we do not have to know the personal name of every demon, we should be able to discern—by the gifts of the Holy Spirit—what demon powers we are dealing with, so we can effectively combat them in the Spirit.

Paul said I do not run with uncertainty nor fight as one who beats the air (1 Corinthians 9:26). In effect, Paul said, I have a purpose, and I do not waste my time punching something that is not there. I have a strategy, and when I throw a punch, it lands on the chin of the devil.

Has the Church been shadow boxing? Have we spent a lot of time, money, and effort without really landing a lot of punches? Are we rescuing the lost or just entertaining them in captivity? Are we piping music to the blind—or restoring their spiritual sight?

In Galilee, Jesus introduced His ministry in the Synagogue

with a quote from a familiar passage in Isaiah chapter 61.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” Luke 4:18-19

We should see this same anointing operating in our ministries and churches regularly. You should see this same anointing working in your life. Jesus emphatically stated the things He did we would do—and greater things—because He was going to the Father and sending the Holy Spirit. The Church is the Body of Christ on earth, and it operates in, and with, the same anointing Jesus had on earth.

Jesus passed another torch to His Church. He was the light of the world. He placed that mantle on you and me when He said, “You are the light of the world....” Our job is to penetrate the darkness because we ARE the light. The only way light does not win over darkness is if the light is hidden. He did not say you should be, could be, ought to be, or might be, the light. He said, you are the light. The light shines or is hidden. Those are the only choices we have. What would it mean for the Church to shine the full light of Christ into the darkness of the world? What would it mean for you to let your light shine in a more significant way?

Defeating the spiritual darkness in this world means shining the light of the Gospel in its face. You can imagine the result that will have. Have you ever turned on a light in a dark room? The response of those in the room is, ‘Hey, turn that light off.’

The light hurts the eyes of those who have long been in darkness. Their eyes are not adjusted, and the light caused

discomfort. Such is shining spiritual light in the secular darkness of this world—be it an individual, a group or a nation. They simply do not like the light at first.

If you shine the light, you can expect persecution. Remember, they crucified Jesus, the true light of the world. Jesus said they would treat His followers the same. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. These were the people who had a corner on the God market. They were the chosen people. They claimed to be expectantly waiting on their Messiah. Yet, when He came, the darkness that had engulfed them kept them from seeing who He really was. He was the light, but the light hurt. They chose to try extinguishing the light by crucifixion.

What was this darkness that blinded much of the priesthood and the Jewish nation? If we can discern the cause of blindness, we will be more prepared to combat it in our lives and the Church. I believe that some sections of the Church today are experiencing similar issues.

First, there was a false interpretation of their scriptures. They expected a King-Messiah to defeat the Romans and restore Israel as a sovereign political power. This is obvious from the question of the disciples the day He ascended. “*Will you now restore the Kingdom to Israel?*” (Acts 1:6) Even after they had spent three years and one-half years with Jesus, they still had not overcome the idea that it was about a physical nation and a political kingdom. If the original apostles were still struggling with the concept, what do you think the general Jewish population believed? A false expectation blinded them.

Next, they substituted man-made doctrine and tradition for scripture.

Jesus said they had made the word of God ineffective by their traditions (Matthew 15:6). Their tried-and-true system of religion became more important than the Word of God itself.

Most people do not realize that the Ark of the Covenant was never in the second temple in Jesus's day. The Holy of Holies was empty. Yet the priesthood carried on the temple's day-to-day religious requirements and the annual sprinkling the blood on the Day of Atonement as if God's presence were there.

The danger of maintaining religious rituals without the manifest presence of God remains significant for Christians today.

Third, they had turned to political power as a means of control. During and after the Maccabean period, about 150 BC, the High Priest's position could be bought by the highest bidder. By Jesus's day, the High priest was appointed—and removed—by Rome. Men had usurped the holy priesthood for financial and political purposes. Of course, the High Priest would have had to agree to work with the Roman government—at least behind the scenes.

Furthermore, the Sadducees controlled the position of the High Priest. The Sadducees were the wealthy aristocrats of Israel. They were legalistic, adhering only to the first five books of the Old Testament. They did not accept the prophets as being from God. They did not believe in spiritual things, including angels and demons, heaven and hell, and life after death. A decidedly non-spiritual approach to God ruled in the temple leadership. Today, politics and a flesh-focused, religious expression have replaced the Spirit of God in many churches.

These three critical issues perpetuated the blindness of the

Jewish nation. They remain a threat to the Church today. Many indications would point to the fact that the westernized version of Christianity mirrors the attitudes of many first-century Jews.

We now need to turn our attention to another issue.

The Bible made it abundantly clear that there is a hierarchy of demonic principalities and powers that rule in the world's unseen realms. Furthermore, it indicates that these principalities and powers are also territorial or geographical in their power structure. Daniel references this fact when the angel visits him after twenty-one days of prayer and fasting. Read the story in Daniel chapter ten. The angel tells him a demonic being called the *prince of the kingdom of Persia* fought against him for twenty-one days before Michael the archangel came to his aid. The angel said he had to return to the battle, but after that, the Prince of Greece would come. The Greek empire under Alexander the Great defeated the Persian empire and ruled until the Roman Empire rose in power.

The truth is there are demonic forces that hold great influence over geographical areas—until those principalities and powers are defeated. Sometimes you can feel the stronghold these powers have on a place when you move toward them. I lived in a town that had been home to a State Mental Hospital since 1885. Many (not all) of the residents through the years had demonic issues. When those people died, the demons they hosted did not die with them. They were released into the geographic area and went about seeking new people to harass and indwell. You could often feel oppression and depression. People told me they could feel it too when they were about forty miles outside of the town driving towards it.

It has been my observation that demons operate within

territories created by men's geopolitical boundaries: like countries, states, provinces, counties, and towns. The narrative in Daniel seems to bear out this truth of demonic, geopolitical dominion and influence.

It has been observed in the USA and elsewhere globally, the power of these demon princes can be broken. Sometimes missionaries would try for years and never make an inroad, and suddenly—it seems—the door is thrown wide open, and hundreds if not thousands for people turn to the Lord.

I was part of a mission organization started by my good friends Richard and June Bartz. Southeast Asia Mission Teams (SeaMisT) was dedicated to training workers to plant churches in eleven Southeast Asian Countries. They have been highly successful over the years.

One story I was privileged to be a part of involved reaching the Aeta people on Negros Island, Philippines. The people lived in great poverty and darkness. Some groups had tried to go in and were always rejected. They even killed some, as the Aeta were known as violent drunks. The Governmental official in charge of the region told our missionary Rodel that he could not get any churches to go into that area. That changed when Rodel went to the tribe, and God opened the door for him to preach the Gospel.

The Chief (who was the grandson of a famous witchdoctor) and his leaders got saved at the first meeting. Soon many Aeta were getting saved, and Bible studies were set up. In four years, the Aeta had their own Church organization registered with the Government (The Aeta Tribal Church of the Philippines), several church buildings, and Bible studies in different villages. They also had a Bible college that had 18 students in the first graduating class. That story started with a prayer to send laborers into the field and a \$35 offering I

gave to send Rodel to the Aeta the first time.

While I do not have time to tell the stories, I encourage you to read the testimonies of places in the USA where Christianity uprooted demonic powers and established a recognizable Christian presence. The story of Tulsa, OK, and Colorado Springs, CO are two incredible stories. The Transformation Series of videos relates amazing stories of cities worldwide controlled by witchcraft, drug cartels, poverty, and many other things. When local pastors and churches joined in sustained prayer to break the demonic strongholds in their cities, the Spirit of God transformed them.

We can no longer afford to ignore the spiritual battle of darkness that exists all around us. The Church must pierce this shroud of spiritual darkness to allow individuals and even regions and nations to receive the Gospel message.

The title of this chapter is This Present Darkness.

Satan's goals and strategies often remain the same, but his tactics are not static. They change and evolve as the world has gone through significant political, social, religious, and philosophical changes in the past two thousand years. From the printing press in the fifteenth century to the worldwide impact of the Internet in the twenty-first century, technological advances have changed the way humanity relates to one another. Do not think that Satan is not in lockstep with these world-changing ideas, events, and inventions.

We can look back—especially over the last 500 years—to see trends in philosophical thinking that ended up in global political movements. The Renaissance brought Europe out of the Dark Ages. While good and necessary in many ways, it nevertheless opened the door to secularism that would come.

The Age of Reason (1800s) promoted secularism and rational thinking as a scientific rather than a superstitious, metaphysical, or spiritual approach to life.

The early 20th century exploded with modernist thinking bringing the world into a new urban-industrial mindset, replacing the rural, agricultural one. As people began migrating to the cities, the worldview of the people also migrated.

Post Modernism replaced modernism. Post Modernism resulted in the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Antiestablishment was another philosophy that dominated western universities that were becoming more and more liberal. Today the dominant thinking of the secular crowd is that individualism is the most important factor in society. The current liberal groupthink that someone can simply self-identify as something different than they are, is one example. A biological woman can simply say she is a man, and that becomes a reality. The rest of the world is required to ignore biological reality and agree without question that this is true. Failing to accept as normal anything someone wants to claim will generate hatred and persecution. Soon—without a significant spiritual awakening—it will produce legal consequences.

Of course, I am leaving out a few evolutionary steps in secular philosophy progression that have brought us to the twenty-first-century secular mindset. However, the specifics are not the main point of this chapter.

The principalities and powers of this present darkness have laid out a master plan of secular thought that has brought a large part of the western world to a place where they think God is no longer relevant to individuals or society. The modern liberal narrative is that religion is wrong because it

oppresses free choice and self-expression (sin) in people.

According to this liberal philosophy, religion is outdated and archaic, holding back society with its morality and self-indulgence restrictions. When this ungodly worldview gains enough momentum to tip the culture away from Christianity, we will see significant effort to shut Christianity down entirely in that society.

It is essential to look at history to understand an important fact. From the early days of the Church, the gospel message impacted first people, then families, then cities, and finally countries. So powerful and noticeable was the transforming power of the Gospel that the ungodly citizens of Thessalonica proclaimed, *“The men that have turned the world upside down have come to our city also”* (Acts 17:6).

While we rejoice that the Gospel spread through Europe, converting the heathen and barbarian, we also must recognize another trend. Inserted into the culture as a seed—often one person or a small team of people acting as an apostolic-evangelistic team—the Gospel grew until whole societies tipped towards Christianity. For many years, these countries or regions operated, to one degree or another, as a Christian society. Yet, at some point, Christianity stopped influencing the culture because it became the culture. When that happened, the culture started slowly to drift away from its Christian moorings. Soon the Church grew lukewarm as the Church tried to stay relevant to the new ungodly trends of changing society. A lukewarm Church has no Spirit, and without the Holy Spirit it has no power to change lives or impact society. In these cases, Christian expression became dead religion mixed with old moral codes and rituals.

At some point, the Christiana message became optional and then irrelevant. The society continued its trend into

worldliness and sin and away from all things God. The Church—made up of many of these increasingly secular-minded people—stumbled along, trying to stay relevant instead of being counter-cultural. Many genuine Christians in these churches were being slowly pulled away with the changing world views until the point came where the radical secular and Biblical worldview collided. A war (sometimes physical and emotional, but always spiritual) ensued for control of the country's cultural worldview.

History shows that the Church has never been good at fighting this particular battle. Country after country, turned upside down by the gospel message, ended up losing the Christian cultural influence that once defined it. The power of God rocked the Middle East and Asia. They are now under the control of an Islamic worldview. North Africa received the Gospel early on—but now persecutes Christians.

Italy, France, Germany, and other European countries were once overtly Christian—at least to the degree they understood it. France declared itself a secular nation in 1905. England and Scotland had significant moves of God. Then there was Ireland, turned upside down by St. Patrick.

Each of these countries reached a level of world power as they remained Christian, most notably England, which started the modern missionary movement. They all slipped back into relative obscurity as they fumbled their Christian legacy and power. One after another, the Spirit of God moved to another nation where the Gospel would be seeded and grow.

Currently, the United States has carried the gospel torch for nearly 400 years. The exact same trend has been happening, with the same result. Christianity dominated the founding of the nation and impacted culture for several hundred years. Slowly but surely, the demonic strategy played out, as we

discussed above. Secular humanism slowly entered the bloodstream of American culture. Later, Marxism and Communism were added to the potentially lethal cocktail of the secular worldview. All these ideologies had one common goal—to get rid of God and any Biblical influence in society.

The 2020 election process in the United States brought the cultural revolution to a head. Secularism had finally gained enough ground that they could launch an all-out war on the Biblical worldview. As I write this in early 2021, anyone who dares to take a stand for Christian values will be loudly denounced as racists, bigots, and worse.

Bolstered by the election of their presidential candidate, the political left is already calling for the censorship of Christians. A prominent liberal news anchor says that Christians are not wanted in the public arena. It is becoming evident that anyone can say anything—no matter how absurd—unless it is a conservative Christian view. So much for the rhetoric about tolerance and unity. How did we get to the place in America—a country founded on the principle of freedom of speech—where Christianity is deemed destructive and repressive?

Unless the Christians in America wake up to what is happening, we will repeat the history of Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Northern Africa.

Christians around the world **MUST** commit to change. Some Christians need to wake up see how much they have compromised. Others need to resign from the ‘bless-me club’ and get serious about making some personal sacrifices for the Kingdom of God. Still others need to get back to a first century expression of Church that emphasizes the Body of Christ and the ministry gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Many of the mainline denominations have moved away from

any dependence on the Holy Spirit and have swallowed the lukewarm, culturally relevant poison that will kill them.

The good news is that The Spirit of God is moving powerfully in the Middle East, China, Southeastern Asia, South America, North Africa, and the South Pacific. However, these fresh moves come at great cost to the believers as they penetrate the darkness.

Church-as-usual will end one way or the other. You and I have a choice to make. We will either pierce the darkness or submit to the darkness. Either way, the Church as we know it will not be recognizable in a few years.

The point of this chapter is to help the reader realize that there is a demonic strategy to corrupt and blind the minds of an entire generation to the truth and reality of God. From the Garden of Eden until this hour, Satan has been at work to deceive and corrupt God's greatest love—mankind.

There is a disturbing story in 2 Kings chapter 21 about a wicked king of Israel named Manasseh who defiled the temple and shut and locked the doors. He reigned fifty-five years. His son reigned after him for two years before he was murdered, along with his corrupt supporters. These two kings did much evil in the sight of God, worshipping idols and turning Israel away from the one true God. Eight-year-old Josiah is appointed king in his father's place. Josiah is a godly king—insomuch as he could be. He followed the ways of King David, restoring true worship to Israel.

At some point, Josiah orders the temple to be reopened, cleansed, and repaired after more than 60 years of neglect. During this renovation, a priest finds the Book of the Law in the temple. They take the book to the king, who realizes that they are not walking in the Lord's commands and orders steps

be taken to reintegrate the teachings in Israel.

The point of this story is the Word of God was lost in one generation. Fifty-seven years to be exact. Could it be that Satan has been working to undermine the Word of God to blind and deceive an entire generation in the last days? He started 6000 years ago with, “Did God really say that?” That same sentiment echoes from liberal politicians, public educators, and celebrities—as well as many of our Bible colleges and seminaries today.

The current liberal social trend is to call the authenticity and authority of the Bible into question. They pay lip-service to it without giving it any power. Their tactic is to silence anyone who would refer to the Bible, calling them bigots, homophobes, racists, or just ignorant. Paul warned of these who had a “*form of godliness without the power of God.*” Jude called them “*clouds without water.*”

This is the present darkness that the twenty-first century Church is combating. We must see it for what it is and—by the direction of the Holy Spirit—form an effective strategy against it for the sake of souls. The godless are working hard to silence the Christian voice. We must not let that happen. We will suffer persecution, intimidation, and ridicule, but we must not give in to the demonic strategy of hiding our light because of fear.

There is one teaching Jesus gave that sums up both the warfare and the victory strategy. It is high time the Church stopped the historical trend of losing the cultural war years after they had initially won it.

Jesus taught the disciples:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you

when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:10-12

Placing the Beatitudes into the context of the spiritual/cultural war we have been discussing changes things considerably. The last one reads right into our current situation and moves us quickly to the point of the battle and the strategy for victory.

Jesus assumes the world will persecute and slander His followers. It is not *if* you will experience persecution. It is a matter of when. Notice the nature of the war. You will be persecuted because you stand for righteousness. They will revile and falsely accuse you because of Jesus's name. Jesus said they would make all kinds of baseless accusations against you if you dared take a Christian stand. The demons hate Jesus, but Jesus is not touchable, so they go after the believers instead. As the old saying goes, if you cannot stop the message, stop the messenger.

Interestingly, people do not mind too much if you talk about God. Most people believe in God to some degree. However, mention Jesus, or pray in Jesus's name, and things change rather quickly. The reason is that there is one name given

under heaven whereby men might be saved. The demonic forces in charge of the world systems do not like that name. It is in Jesus's name they are defeated—and they know it.

This onslaught against Christians is witnesses around the world. Over fifty countries today are hostile to Christianity. Evangelism is illegal, and a believer could face prison or even death just for having a Bible or sharing the Gospel.

Western Christians face a different kind of persecution. Freedom of religion (which relatively few people enjoy around the world) is eroding. Hate speech laws are aimed at silencing the Biblical teaching concerning homosexuality and other moral issues. In late 2020 we saw even more significant measures to silence, not just Biblical concepts, but anything that does not line up with a liberal, leftist agenda. This year, the liberals have worked hard at labeling everyone that does not go along with their false narrative as bigots, racists, hate-mongers, homophobes, and idiots.

The idea is that if you disagree with them, you are a hindrance to society. Some have warned that failing to go along with the leftist agenda would come back to haunt people in terms of employment, social acceptance, education, and opportunity. This sounds exactly like the pressure applied in communist countries.

Given enough power, they will try to force Christianity out of the public arena. Ultimately, they want to eradicate Christianity completely. This statement is not an exaggeration. We already see many countries with this agenda. Satan does not want people to get saved. On the other hand, genuine Christianity limits the erosion of society and places a check on sin. Remember, it is the spirit of the world that promotes and empowers sin and corruption.

The apparent strategy of Satan is to silence the Church. Are you being silenced? Will you be silenced? Remember, Satan comes as both a serpent and a dragon in the Bible. The snake is a smooth-talking deceiver, and the dragon brings persecution. These are the two strategies the Church of the twenty-first century must discern accurately. We must not be silent even when the world is yelling in our faces to shut up. We must not run for fear because of persecution. Trust God.

Those who wanted to stop the gospel message threatened the apostles with beatings, imprisonment, and even death. The Christians' response was phenomenal. They prayed—not for safety—but for boldness to preach the gospel message with miraculous signs attending the preaching. They refused to be silenced, and they refused to run. They knew that only a miraculous presentation of the Gospel would pierce the spiritual darkness and save souls. The Church must return to that mindset today.

The modern secular worldview in the United States and other westernized nations embodies what Isaiah prophesied:

Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; Who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Isaiah 5:20

We see this in the news all the time now. Any perversion is applauded, while any stand for morality is scoffed. The world has taken control of entertainment, education, and politics. There is a constant effort from every corner to re-educate this generation, from normalizing the occult to teaching grade school children about sexual perversion. To call this out and take a Biblical stand invites persecution.

I believe that parts of the Church have been so focused on their own blessings and victories that they have been

sidetracked from the greater battle around them. God has a global—dare I say cosmic—agenda. It is more significant than anything going on in my life. Certainly, God wants to work in your life, but as a smaller part of a larger plan. We must get our eyes off ourselves and onto the eternal purposes of God—which are much greater than merely getting souls to heaven.

CHAPTER 7

THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

In this section, we want to discuss three things. What is *discernment*? How does a Christian develop it? And why is it necessary for the Christ-follower?

First, we need to get a working definition of discernment. Discernment is not human intuition. That is soulish. Some people are very intuitive, but that quality still falls short of spiritual discernment. The word is associated with experience, examination, investigation, judgment, and keen perception, both from a Biblical and a modern, secular aspect. Intuition is operating on a feeling, while discernment uses wisdom and experience. When we add the adjective *spiritual* to discernment, we add another dimension—the Holy Spirit and the spiritual gifts He imparts to believers.

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, discernment is (in part) ... “the quality of being able to **grasp** and comprehend what is **obscure**: skill in discerning.”²

Dictionary.com explains it this way. “Discernment is the ability to tell things apart; To categorize them, even when they appear to be very similar. People with discernment are able to make keen observations about things. Discernment is often thought to be an ability of those with wisdom or

²<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discernment>

experience.”³

The Bible talks about our need for spiritual discernment. King David’s son, Solomon, famously prayed for discernment and wisdom when he was about to take over the reins of the kingdom. He desired to discern good and evil, so he could be a good ruler. This pleased the Lord so much that He gave Solomon wisdom and discernment, plus riches and long life.

One of the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit is “discerning of spirits,” which was mentioned in an earlier chapter. We will revisit this gift briefly later in the chapter.

There is a familiar passage of Scripture we want to consider. Paul refers to Isaiah 64:4 in his letter to the Corinthians. He paraphrased it slightly.

But as it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” (1 Corinthians 2:9)

We have all heard this passage preached—many times probably. Preachers make three mistakes with this passage. First, they fail to consider the context, pulling this verse out of the middle of Paul’s larger narrative. Second, they apply it to heaven and the unseen glories awaiting us there. Third, they make it about what we cannot or do not know (yet).

This passage has nothing to do with heaven. And it has nothing to do with what we cannot or do not know. Putting the text back into its context reveals a different message altogether. The message of which I speak is the focus of our

³<https://www.dictionary.com> Unabridged, based on the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, © Random House, Inc. 2020

current topic in this chapter. Let us consider the context.

However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him." But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so, no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For "who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Christ. 1 Corinthians 2:9-16

The subject is not heaven. It is revelation knowledge. It is not about what we cannot know but rather how we can understand spiritual things.

To understand mysteries, in a Biblical sense, we need to

understand a couple of things. A mystery was truth hidden and then revealed. God might hide truth in a parable or religious ritual. Sometimes mysteries were buried in the stories of Israel's history.

At times, God spoke to a prophet then instructed the prophet to seal the revelation for a time only to be unlocked later on the prophetic timeline.

A proper discussion of mysteries and revelations is outside the scope of our present discussion. Still, I encourage you to read the following passages to get a quick understanding of the issue Paul is talking about.

God gave some revelation to Daniel and then told him to seal it up until the time of the end (Daniel 12:4). Paul heard "unspeakable words," which he said was unlawful to utter (2 Corinthians 12:4). John also received some revelation he was told not to write down (The Revelation 10:3-4).

Some mysteries have already been revealed or are in the process of being revealed. These include the mystery of the Body of Christ (Colossians 1:26-27), the mystery of Israel and the Gentiles forming the Church as "one new man" (Ephesians 2:13-19, 3:1-6), the mystery of the Church as the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:32), and the mystery of lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2:7), among others.

Some mysteries have not yet been revealed or—quite possibly—are in the process of being revealed in these last days. It is these things Paul is talking about in the passage above.

It is also important to note what happens when we take this one verse out of context. As a standalone verse, it seems to say we cannot know some things. This interpretation is very mysterious and sentimental and makes for intriguing

sermons—but it is totally out of context. What does the passage say in context?

But as it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. Vs. 9-10

Verse ten starts with “but.” Verse nine was a reference from the Old Testament with which the Jews were very familiar. However, being under the Old Covenant, without the indwelling Holy Spirit, they could not understand the spiritual truth and reality it pointed. These truths were sealed.

What is this passage really saying? Simple! Man cannot receive nor understand the things of God with his natural senses. Our natural eyes cannot see the mysteries of God. Our natural ability to hear and learn cannot (in and of itself) cause us to understand. Our soulish hearts (mind and intellect) cannot perceive the things of God. In short natural man cannot receive the things of God—as we will see in a minute.

However, verse ten turns this completely around. “But God has revealed them to us by His Spirit.” It is not about what you cannot know. It is about what you cannot know with strictly human learning and understanding. We can understand the things of God, but it is only by the Holy Spirit.

We need to consider what Paul says in this passage:

1. God conveyed His truth in mysteries that require spiritual revelation (discernment) to understand.
2. Men cannot comprehend God’s plans and purposes with their natural human abilities.
3. God does reveal these things to us by the Spirit of God.

4. The things of God are freely given to us (as opposed to something we cannot know).
5. There is a *spirit of the world* and the Spirit of God. Either can be received.
6. The Holy Spirit teaches us (and we should teach others) to compare spiritual things with other spiritual things. (As opposed to trying to understand God, the Kingdom of God, and the Bible from a purely worldly viewpoint).
7. The natural man (without the Holy Spirit) does not receive the things of God.
8. The natural man considers the things of God as foolishness.
9. The things of God are spiritually discerned (revealed by the Holy Spirit.)
10. We (Christians) have the mind of Christ.

Placing this passage in context gives us considerable understanding. The Church must have spiritual discernment and wisdom that comes by depending on and submitting to the Holy Spirit alone. Attempting to approach the Bible, like any other subject—from a purely human aspect—has done significant damage to the faith that was once delivered to the saints. Many Bible colleges and seminaries spend more time trying to disprove the Bible’s validity than building the faith of the young leaders they are thrusting out on the unsuspecting Church.

The phrase, *spirit of the world*, indicates more than human philosophy or worldview behind world politics and social norms.

Paul refers to the *rulers of this age* not understanding God’s plans, purposes, and wisdom. These rulers include both demonic principalities and the human rulers they influence

and promote.

Throughout the ebb and flow of history, you can see the demonic influence in secular culture and society. I deal with this subject in more detail in the chapter titled *This Present Darkness*. This is one area where the Church must specifically develop discernment.

Too often, Christians are more influenced by their peers and the society around them than they are by the Bible. I agree that sometimes we need to take a serious look at Church dogma. However, we still need to do so from a Biblical worldview, not a secular one.

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.” Isaiah 55:8-

9

Men have always tried to force a sense of humanness upon God. That is the essence of idolatry. Attributing human traits, logic, and reasoning to God is foolish. The gods of Greek and Roman mythology were rife with jealousy, pride, anger, sexual immorality, and other ungodly traits. In short, they were just super-humans, subject to the same sin and frailty as anyone else. The God we serve is high above any human weakness and frailty. Likewise, the way He thinks, plans, and executes those plans is higher than mortal men could possibly imagine. It is a huge mistake to apply worldly wisdom to the things of God.

Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased

God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 1 Corinthians 1:20-25

We simply must stop basing our pop theology on human (secular) social norms. God does not change. God does not need to change to stay relevant to the twenty-first century. We cannot take our flawed human emotion and reasoning and apply it to God. We must take God for who and what He revealed Himself to be in the Bible.

Spiritual discernment! That is what you and I need. That is what our church leaders need. That is what the world needs. We must come back to total dependence on the Holy Spirit as our teacher. Jesus told the soon-to-be apostles that the Holy Spirit would be in them and teach them, leading them to all truth. Attempting to understand the Bible without a vital relationship with the Holy Spirit is spiritual suicide.

Having considered what discernment is and why we need it, we want to shift gears. Where does discernment come?

Solomon prayed for wisdom and discernment and it pleased the Lord. Paul prayed for the Ephesian believers that God would grant them a Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Christ (Ephesians 1:17). He prayed for the Philippians that they would abound in knowledge and discernment (Philippians 1:9).

Solomon gives us this instruction:

TEST THE SPIRITS

So that you incline your ear to wisdom, And apply your heart to understanding; Yes, if you cry out for discernment, And lift up your voice for understanding, If you seek her as silver, And search for her as for hidden treasures; Then you will understand the fear of the Lord.... (Proverbs 2:2-6)

The first step in obtaining discernment is to ask for it and seek it. God is pleased when we desire to move past our human and worldly understanding and commit to hearing from and walking in His Spirit. Pride is a danger at this point. Thinking our education or doctrinal statement is enough to not bother praying for spiritual discernment is deception.

I got saved in July 1980. In January of 1983, I received the Baptism with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in tongues. I was attending a Southern Baptist church at the time. The pastor was a good man. He had pastored the same Church for about 40 years. He called me into his office to discuss my newfound experience in the Holy Spirit.

By discuss, I mean he said, do not do it in Church or teach it to church members. I shared my experience with him and confirmed my belief in the baptism with the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. He told me I did not know what I was talking about because he had been preaching longer than I had been alive. To him, his longtime experience outweighed everything else. The bigger problem was, he had been wrong longer than I had been alive. We must never come to the place where we think we have it all figured out. We must continually humble ourselves before God and seek spiritual discernment, especially in areas that challenge us. We may be right all along, but we must be willing to let God reveal new things to us if necessary.

If your heart is right, God will begin training you to discern

both good and evil—as we will discuss next.

The second step of obtaining discernment comes through knowledge and experience.

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Hebrews 5:12-14

Here and elsewhere, Paul refers to two levels of spiritual understanding using the illustration of a baby with food.

Milk is the basic food for every mammal. It is easy to get, easy to swallow, and easy to digest. It has the nourishment needed to see a baby grow to the point of eating more solid foods. The milk of the word is the simple Gospel message and salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. It might include the basics of baptism, fellowship, the necessity of Bible study, worship, and prayer. Any person saved and indwelt by the Holy Spirit can receive and understand these messages and begin to grow in their new Christian life. Paul says these young believers are *unskilled* or inexperienced in working with the deeper truths of the Bible.

Paul contrasts the simple milk of the Gospel with the solid food of more in-depth revelation knowledge. Solid food, or “strong meat,” as the King James Version translates it, is for older, more mature Christians. People who have spent time in the word of God, being instructed by the faithful five-fold ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

Too many young Christians have *choked* on the Word of God. Not only did they choke, but they also often caused others to choke, trying to teach something they really did not understand. Paul warned about wanting to be a teacher because the teachers would receive a stricter judgment.

From where does spiritual discernment come? Or perhaps the better question is: how do I get it? Paul says it comes (in part) from exercising our senses. In other words, it comes with discipleship, spiritual growth, maturity, experience, and learning. We develop discernment as we encounter God in the world. We learn to hear His voice, follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and find our place in the plans and purposes of God for our generation.

When Paul says we have our senses exercised, he is not referring to our physical senses alone. We have spiritual senses as well as natural senses. The previous passage made it clear that we cannot understand the things of God without the Spirit of God. However, the natural senses, hearing, seeing, thinking, are still a huge part of our lives. As we use those senses to bring in information, we combine it with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Fifteen times the Bible uses the phrase *“he that has ears to hear.”* That refers to a spiritual sense of hearing, not the physical one. When the Bible talks about light and darkness, it often refers to spiritual sight, not physical light or dark. These spiritual senses must be exercised with use over time to become accurate.

Everyone understands exercise. As we push our muscles to the limit, we get stronger, leaner, and healthier. Exercise is good physically, and spiritually. Physical exercise entails some discomfort. It means hard work and sweat. It might mean sore muscles. Likewise, exercising our spiritual

muscles (discernment) may mean getting out of our comfort zone. It might mean confronting issues that cause strife or turmoil. Sometimes it is just easier to ignore the spiritual problems than getting caught up in controversy. Some ministers do not want to rock the boat because doing so would jeopardize their positions and income.

There is one last thing we need to consider in this passage of Scripture. Paul says we discern both good and evil. When Solomon prayed, he asked for wisdom and discernment (1 Kings 3:9). He wanted to distinguish between good and evil. That is critical because I have run into some people who just want to discern evil. They think they have been given a ministry to go into churches and point out everything they believe is wrong. Sometimes, I think they have the fleshly gifts of suspicion and criticism.

I had a friend who pastored in a town about thirty miles from me. I often went to special services in his Church; however, he never came to our Church. I asked a member of his church why he never attended anything we hosted. He said the pastor told him there are some things out of order at my church, and if he were to come to a service, he would be responsible to correct them. So, he did not come. The fallacy of that is if he really thought it was his job to correct me, he should have done it regardless of if he came to a service or not. He never did tell me what he thought was out of order (but I suspect it had something to do with allowing women to share from the pulpit).

Spiritual discernment is also about discerning good, not just pointing out the bad. Of course, I am not just talking about preference in the style of music or preaching. I am talking about the spirit behind what is happening in a service. We have all been in services where the spirit did not feel *right*. Something was off, even if you could not put your finger on it.

We need to rely on these moments of spiritual discernment. The same thing goes for individuals. Years ago, I used to go for a walk around a local lake and pray. One night there was a couple fishing. I stopped and chatted with them briefly, and I knew instantly that they were Christians, even though we did not talk about it. Some months later, I started attending a new church and discovered that she was the worship leader. He played in the worship band and taught from the pulpit sometimes.

As a missionary, I speak in many different churches, probably twenty-five or thirty every year. And I attended some services where I am not speaking at all. Some are in Papua New Guinea, where we serve on the field, and some are in the USA as we travel and minister to local churches. After a while, you get good at discerning the spirit—or lack thereof—that rests on a church. I would have to say that most of them have had a good spiritual atmosphere. I have often told my wife “there is a good spirit in this place.” Some, however, have a different spirit.

At times I have discerned a spirit of pride or legalism. Sometimes the spirit behind a church is about promoting the pastor or some type of spiritual control. Remember, there are different spirits. There is the Spirit of God, angelic spirits, demonic spirits, and human spirits. Not every negative spirit driving a church is demonic—sometimes, it is just fleshly. The Bible gives us an excellent way to test the spirit operating in a service. “...*Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty*” 2 Corinthians 3:17.

In the mid-nineties, there was a sustained revival in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The Toronto Airport Vineyard Church was experiencing an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and tens of thousands of people came from all over the world to get in on the services. Of course, there was great controversy—like any

revival—because the outpouring entailed many unusual manifestations. Many said it was demonic. Others said it was from God.

I was curious, as was a pastor friend of mine. We wanted to know what the spirit was behind this outpouring. We drove to Toronto and spent the night. The next morning, we decided to go to the church and try to sense the spirit behind it without all the dynamics involved in a service. They only had night services, so the place was empty and unlocked. We went in and just spent an hour praying in the building and sensing what was behind it all. We all agreed that there was a strong and peaceful presence of God in the empty building.

That night we stood in line for two hours to get a seat. The worship was good, and the word was simple and on target. Then they moved all the chairs, and teams of two began to move through the audience, praying for people. I saw things I have never seen before. The Bible talks about signs and wonders. A sign points your attention to something else and a wonder—it makes you go, “I wonder what just happened?”

Some things could only be explained as God’s Spirit moving on people. On the other hand, I saw some things that did not sit right with my spirit. It was not just my opinion either. It was something the Spirit of God pointed out as demonic. My senses were being exercised to discern both good and evil. Certainly, the demonic element did not take away from the Spirit of God moving. Hopefully, at some point, the false things were discerned and dealt with. I need to add, the things I believe were demonic were not being administered by the prayer teams of the Church. Even though the audience was instructed not to pray for anyone, some were disobeying and doing it anyway. The problems stemmed from them.

My conclusion from this experience and others was that God

and Satan are never very far apart. When the Spirit of God moves, the devil is always there trying to derail the move and bring confusion. When Satan is at work, God is there to redeem and restore. Therefore, it is so crucial for Christians to be able to discern both good and evil. James writes to his readers that they should submit to God and resist the devil. I am afraid that too often, we do the opposite because of a lack of discernment.

Just because God is moving does not mean we might not sense some fleshly or even demonic elements. That should not cast doubt on the whole thing. On the other hand, we should not just accept everything that goes on because we discern the Spirit of God moving. We need discernment to sort the things out and call out that which is not right without destroying the genuine move of the Spirit of God.

Remember, one definition of discernment was to be able to differentiate between things that looked similar. Satan is a counterfeiter. He mimics the things of God. However, there are a few things that he cannot mimic: love, humility, truth, and justice, to name a few. We need to examine doctrines, practices, and ministries to see if these qualities exist in conjunction with spiritual manifestations.

The last thing to consider is discernment is associated with the gifts of the Spirit. Discerning of Spirits is one of the nine charismatic gifts imparted by the Holy Spirit. We should resist simply reducing this to the *gift of discernment*. As discussed, discernment generally with prayer, wisdom, understanding, and practice. Discerning of spirits is a more targeted gift. On specific occasions, the Holy Spirit imparts information to discern the spirit behind a doctrine, practice, or experience.

The focus of this book is testing the spirits. We are

admonished not to believe every spirit. Discerning of spirits is different from general discernment experienced through spiritual discipleship. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit that cannot be earned, bought, or otherwise merited. Gifts are given and must be received. We are admonished to seek the gifts. It also requires faith, as does all things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.

I have discovered that there is no one-size-fits-all with the things of God. According to Paul, the various gifts operate differently in different people. Because of this, it is hard to explain precisely how discerning of spirits works. Some people see into the spiritual realm to discern demonic or angelic spirits.

I was leading a revival service in Papua New Guinea. One of the young Bible college students who were with me saw a demonic spirit in front of the platform. He took a picture of it. It was clearly visible in the photo.

Others sense spirits differently. I have never seen a demonic spirit, but there were times I could tell you where one was standing.

We sense spirits by our interaction with the Holy Spirit. There were many times I knew a spirit was operating in a person I was praying over.

As a pastor, I operate in the discerning of spirits, word of wisdom, word of knowledge, and prophecy regularly. These gifts help spiritual leadership to know how to minister to those we lead.

You cannot heal a demon, and you cannot cast out a sickness. One reason we may not be as successful in ministering to people is the tendency to approach everything on a one-size-fits-all basis. Instead of taking time to seek the discernment

of the Holy Spirit, we tend to minister out of head knowledge, or worse, our spiritual routine.

We need to know what is really happening in a person's life who has come for prayer and ministry. Sometimes bondages, illnesses, and even demonic harassment are complicated by sin, resentment, unforgiveness, and other possible issues in the person we are ministering to. The Holy Spirit knows exactly what the problem—and the solution—is. We must take time to interact with the Holy Spirit when ministering to people.

The issues of unforgiveness, bitterness, bondage to sin, lust, greed—even pride—*can* be rooted in demonic oppression. We need to discern if there is a human or demonic spirit behind these issues to minister effectively to others. Our ability to hear more clearly and trust more explicitly comes as we exercise our senses to discern both good and evil.

Discernment is desperately needed in the Church today. You and I need to take this situation very seriously and seek God for discernment.

CHAPTER 8

TESTING THE SPIRITS

***And you have tested those who say they
are apostles and are not, and have
found them liars....”***

The Revelation 2:3

The critical thought, foundational to this book, is found in the apostle Paul’s instruction to the Church to test the spirits behind doctrines and manifestations. We were not just to believe something based on outward observation and human wisdom, especially when there are demonstrations of spiritual power involved.

Ministers Are Not Perfect

It should be noted that ministers of God are human and have flaws, areas of immaturity, and even some error in teaching. That does not automatically make them false prophets or teachers. We need to give some grace.

I did not write this book so some could go around pointing fingers and pronouncing condemnation on people. Paul admonished the believers to “*make allowances for one another, because you love one another*” (Colossians 3:13 NLT).

I like to define “allowance” as the little space on either side of perfect. Christians who want to fight, argue, and break fellowship over every little issue are not mature like they think they are. It is immaturity that generates that spirit of

intolerance.

Unity in diversity—not agreement—is the highest Biblical principle. Of course, this does not mean accepting false doctrine or practice. I am talking about disagreements on more minor issues.

Because a minister is immature in some areas does not mean they are operating in demonic power. However, these areas of weakness, immaturity, or false teachings can—in the long run—cause serious spiritual problems. He can even open the doors for demonic power to invade their lives and ministries. There is a danger that those who follow these fleshly teachers will end up accepting the same false spirit into their lives.

A good friend of mine was a powerful evangelist for the Lord. We spent many hours praying together and discussing the Lord. We traveled to revivals together and were in many church services together.

I am sad to say that today my friend is not serving God. He is an alcoholic. He was introduced to sex at the age of eight by a teenage neighbor girl. He developed this sexual identity too young and was never able to overcome it. He became addicted to pornography.

There seemed to be a spiritual power of seduction that attracted women to him. He enjoyed the attraction and attention. He ended up divorced from his wife. Soon after, he started living with another woman.

My friend also had a problem with grace. He felt like he had to labor over his ministry. It burned him out and caused alcoholism.

My friend is still a Christian, but he is backslidden. He could be a powerful ministry for Jesus. Still, because he would not

deal with the sexual addiction, it opened the door for the devil to derail his calling and destiny in God. Of course, if he genuinely turned to God and allowed forgiveness, deliverance, and healing into his life, God would restore and use him once again. My friend's story is tragic, but it is a powerful lesson to all of us. Just because God is using us does not mean we do not have to allow God to continue cleaning and maturing our lives.

At the end of His ministry, Jesus said the devil was coming, but he had nothing in Him. Can we say the same thing? Sins, weaknesses, personality flaws, and other things can allow the devil a place in our lives to wage warfare against us. Someone once referred to this internal weakness as a handle the devil could use for leverage in our lives.

False prophets and teachers have more to do with false doctrine, wrong motives, and false spiritual manifestations than immaturity. We need to be careful about labeling a person a false prophet just because they struggle with some issue in their lives.

The Two-Part Test

John's two-part instruction to the Church was simple: 1. Do not believe everything; 2. Test everything.

An important question presents itself at this point. How do we test the spirits? What are the things we should look for in discerning if a spiritual doctrine or manifestation is true or not? In this chapter, we will look at several spiritual tests we can apply to the spirit behind a thing to discern what sort it is.

Test #1: Does it Testify About Jesus?

The Book of the Revelation tells us:

And he said to me, “These are the true sayings of God.” And I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “See that you do not do that! I am your fellow servant and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” The Book of Revelation 19:9-10

True prophets, apostles, and teachers will be focused on Jesus. False ministries will focus on their own ministries or prophetic words, visions, and messages that do not exalt Jesus but rather promote people. You will notice that John fell on his face to worship the angel but was forbidden. Faithful ministries will always defer worship to God.

Test #2: Who is Exalted?

Spiritual power tends to produce celebrity worship—that is, unduly exalting the servant of God rather than God. That is a form of idolatry. An idol’s purpose was to give the worshipper a physical object to help them worship an invisible god. Man is religious by nature. Even if they do not worship the true God, man has a religious tendency. Without a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and the proper instruction in true worship, men will create their own religious expressions. The tendency to idolatry is built into fallen humanity.

Because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Romans 1:21-23

A modern religious man may not bow to an idol made with gold, silver, wood, or stone—but he will create idols. Usually,

that idol is a person being used by God or who appears to be used by God. The minister becomes the object of devotion and even worship. People began to follow a particular minister, exalting them over others. They may even claim that their minister is the only true minister, prophet, or apostle.

Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 1 Corinthians 1:21-23

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ ... for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal? 1 Corinthians 3:1-4

Faithful ministries will focus on the testimony of Jesus and point people to worship and adore nothing but God. False—and sometimes, immature ministries will seek the attention and fame offered by man. As Jesus put it, “They have their reward.”

Sometimes the minister begins to claim an exclusive anointing, revelation, or relationship with God. His followers begin to believe and propagate this. Other times the followers exalt the leader. The immature leaders, loving the attention, fall into the pride trap and accept adoration and praise. Claiming that the person, ministry, message, or experience is exclusively right and that everyone else is wrong is one sign of demonic deception and false doctrine.

Ministers who are false or immature tend to love this attention. They love to have the people exalt them and even

worship them to some degree.

Either way, an idol is created by man that will detract from God's true worship. Satan loves these situations and works to find ministers and congregations to develop these idols and turn true worship away from God.

Even the great apostle John was prone to this temptation to worship someone other than God. It is human nature, and we must be careful that we do not seek it or fall prey to it. The angel immediately put a stop to John's error. If you are a minister who has a following, you need to take care that your followers do not exalt you over Jesus. Take the angel's example and stop people from lifting you up and redirect them to honor God and Jesus Christ.

The first and second test of a spirit behind a doctrine, experience, or practice is: does it honor Jesus Christ and focus on Him. Even if He is not the center of the message or event, the glory will be directed towards Him and not man. We should ask the question "who is being exalted in this?"

Test # 3: Does it Glorify God's Work in Man or Man's Efforts to Please God?

The next test involves who gets the glory. Is it men's self-effort (legalism) or the work of the Holy Spirit in and through people (grace)?

From the creation of mankind, there was an instinctive desire in man to understand and relate to a god or gods. The earliest civilizations had a religious foundation. They all worshipped someone or something. The opening pages of the book of Genesis show us clearly the two ways in which man would attempt to approach God.

Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of

the ground. And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. Genesis 4:2-5

Of course, the story ends with Cain murdering his brother Abel out of anger and jealousy. That resulted in God's punishment. Many people miss the important lesson God intended for us to learn from this story. That lesson was about true and false worship. It was about the two ways men would attempt to approach and worship God. The story tells us about God's means of salvation and man's attempts at redemption. It is the first time the Bible points out the difference between grace and religious self-effort. This story sets the stage for the rest of the Bible.

God's rejection of Cain's offering is troubling. You will note God did not reject Cain—only Cain's offering. Cain had approached God based on his own hard work and efforts. He brought the fruit of the ground—vegetables—to God. No doubt his motive was pure. No doubt, he desired to honor and please God. He even offered His best. But there was a problem.

God had cursed the ground because of Adam's sin. God told Adam he would till the soil and eat his food in the "*sweat of his brow*" (Genesis 3:17-19). In other words, Adam and his descendants would have to work hard to produce a living and food to survive. Before the fall, they did not have to work at all. God provided all they needed.

There were two results of this curse. First, man would have to work and labor to produce his own livelihood. Second, anything that came from the cursed ground would also be

cursed. The story behind the story is that Cain offered his own hard work, and the result was fruit that was already cursed.

Able, on the other hand, brought a blood sacrifice—a substitute life and death. Of course, this is a picture of salvation by faith in the shed blood of Jesus. While tending sheep was a job of sorts, it was the aspect of a substitute that was important. Abel was a shepherd. He did not have to work to produce sheep. He only tended them. The issue of a blood sacrifice—as opposed to hard work—is clearly defined here.

From this story, we discover both the religious nature of man (they wanted to worship God) and the two methods by which man would attempt to be justified by God. Abel offered a blood substitute (representing faith and grace), and Cain offered his own hard work and efforts, which God already cursed. Additionally, Cain's offering did not include blood. The sacrificial lamb represented life and death, while the vegetables represented dead works.

While there may be many expressions of religion in the world, they all stem from one of these two sources. Grace or works. Faith or legalism.

Jesus said, *“For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”* (John 1:17). Here we clearly see the distinction of the two ways to approach God.

Paul tells us, *“I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain”* (Galatians 2:21). Elsewhere Paul explains:

For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace. Galatians 5:3-4

There are many more verses that contrast the Law of Moses with the Grace of Jesus; however, a complete discussion of this truth is outside this book's primary purpose. The key point in this section is that men still try to be right with God, either through religious self-effort or through faith in the shed blood of Jesus.

The Law of Moses contained a curse and a blessing.

Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God.
Deuteronomy 11:26-28

We know two things. First, the Israelites were never able to keep the Law and were rejected by God (Hebrews 8:7-9). We see the curse that came upon Israel time and again as they not only failed to live by the Law but turned to idolatry. God would bring judgment as a way of turning their hearts back to Him. That was in accordance with the Old Covenant, to which the forefathers had agreed. God was not mean; He was operating according to a previously agreed-upon covenant.

This failure on the part of Israel ultimately resulted in God instituting a New Covenant with Israel and the rest of the world (Hebrews 8:7). This covenant would not be like the Old Covenant based on legalistic observance of rules, morality, and ritual (verses 8-9). This covenant would be based on faith in Jesus Christ. God offered it to Israel and Judah first. However, God would extend that covenant to the nations to fulfill the promises made to Abraham, the Father of Faith (Romans 4).

The second thing we know is that no man can keep the Law of Moses. That righteousness would never come by keeping

the Law. Paul tells us the purpose of the Law was to “bring us to Christ” (Galatians 3:24). We discover this truth in Paul’s conclusion of the matter.

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “the just shall live by faith.” Yet the law is not of faith, but “the man who does them shall live by them.” Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. Galatians 3:10-14

Let us tie this together. God rejected Cain’s offering because of two things. One was offering his self-effort to please God. The other was that what he offered was already cursed. We see these same two characteristics in the man’s legalistic efforts to please God. God had already condemned the self-righteousness of legalistic religion because no one could live up to the Law’s moral requirements. “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” Romans 3:23 “*As it is written: There is none righteous, no, not one....*” Romans 3:10.

Any doctrine, ritual, or experience that exalts self-effort or even morality as a means of pleasing God is false. The writer of the book of Hebrews is very *straight*, “*Without faith it is impossible to please God*” (Hebrews 6:6).

Likewise, things like holy water, special anointing oil, various church rituals, or other extra-Biblical things are man-made efforts and already have a curse upon them.

If the emphasis is placed upon humanity doing something special to gain favor with God—be it morality, ritual, or anything else—it is wrong. God already loves every person, but acceptance is found only in and through Jesus Christ.

Some confusion exists in these points. In Paul's day, Jewish legalists claimed Paul was teaching that we could continue sinning (by saying we were not made right by keeping the moral Law). Paul's answer was, "God forbid." Paul argues that true salvation also produces true holiness. The question should not be, 'is it a sin?' The question should be, 'does doing or not doing it make me right with God?' The Christian finds salvation and justification through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Saying we are not justified by moral effort does not mean it is okay to keep sinning. Jesus told the woman caught in adultery, I do not condemn you, go and sin no more. Forgiveness did not mean it was okay to keep sinning.

Test #4: Does it Produce Peace and Unity?

The Bible is clear; God desires unity in the His Church, not strife. Jesus is the *Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6). False prophets and apostles like to produce strife because it tends to separate the true believers and allows the false ministers to collect those that are left. Consider James' instructions to the Church:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good

fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. James 3:13-18

The minister who is truly walking in God's wisdom and power will have the following characteristics:

- They will conduct themselves well while dealing with others.
- They will have a genuine meekness (humility).
- They will display real wisdom in getting things done.
- They will have pure motives, not selfish ambition.
- They will seek peace, not cause strife.
- They will be gentle, not forceful.
- They will not always be demanding their own way.
- They will be filled with mercy, not condemnation, and judgment.
- They will produce good spiritual fruit.
- They will not seek man's favor or give special treatment to some and not others (as a means of gaining favor). There should be no wantok⁴ system in the Church.
- They are not hypocritical. (The Greek word for *hypocrisy* in the Bible means to wear a mask. It comes from the Greek theater, where an actor would cover his face with a mask to portray the emotion he wanted the audience to see. It might be a happy mask, or sad, or scared. False ministers

⁴ Wantok (One Talk in English) is a Papua New Guinea Tok Pisin term for someone who is a family or tribe member. It means they speak the same language and are therefore more closely related than people in other tribes. Tribalism dictates that you give special consideration to your wantoks over those who are not wantoks. In other words—favoritism to those close to you or most like you.

wear masks to hide their true nature and motives.
They are actors who do not show their true selves.)

False workers love to fight and argue over doctrine and practice. You can be sure that those who have this tendency are not operating in the Spirit of God. There is true and false doctrine. We need to take a stand for the truth and not compromise. However, the difference here is the person who likes to argue and create strife. To them, being right (or even controversial) is more important than unity in the Body of Christ.

I had a friend who created strife everywhere he went. He moved to my town and wanted to come to my church. He told me, "You have to be careful because where I go there usually ends up being strife because God uses me to bring it out."

Here was a man who loved to generate strife, and he honestly thought it was a spiritual gifting from God. Sometime later, he attended our church, and all was fine for a while, but soon enough, he started to create strife and got mad at me because I would not let him get away with it. We are no longer friends. The unity and safety of the congregation were more important than allowing this man to bring strife and confusion.

A contentious spirit is not a gift from God. Contention comes from immaturity. However, most contentious people consider themselves to be more spiritual than others.

These six things the Lord hates, Yes, seven are an abomination to Him: A proud look, A lying tongue, Hands that shed innocent blood, A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that are swift in running to evil, A false witness who speaks lies, And one who sows discord among brethren. Proverbs 6:16-19 (Emphasis mine)

Notice the seventh thing is an abomination: People who sow (plant the seeds) of discord and strife among the Church. God hates this, yet some in the Church think they are spiritual by creating strife, confusion, and division. Again, the motive is selfish ambition. It is often an attempt to divide the people of God with the goal of getting people to follow them rather than real spiritual leaders. Leaders who use anger, manipulation, intimidation, and strife to control the Church are not operating in the Spirit of God.

James said this leadership was earthly (as opposed to heavenly and spiritual), sensual (of the flesh), and demonically inspired.

True wisdom, doctrine, and practice will tend toward peace and unity, not strife and division.

Test #5: Is it Consistent with God's Complete Character and nature?

God is infinite. He is complex. He is perfect. God is a righteous God, and that He is love. We learn from the prophets that He is a jealous God and a merciful God. He is just and righteous, but He still justifies the sinner.

Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Psalm 85:10

The psalmist prophetically declares the seeming opposites in God's nature meet and agree in Jesus Christ. It is hard for humans to reconcile the perfect balance of God's character. Because of this, some people emphasize one characteristic of God's nature over the opposite characteristic.

Some will focus on God's righteousness and holiness and preach fire and brimstone, condemnation, and damnation. Others will highlight the other side of God's nature and

preach God's love. These false teachers will say it does not matter what we do because God loves us.

We see the two natures of God displayed in Jesus when he deals with the woman caught in adultery. After refuting the religious leaders who wanted to stone her, Jesus told the woman, I do not condemn you; go and sin no more (John 8:11).

The truth is that the two natures of God provide the very basis of salvation. Without righteousness, there would be no need for salvation. Without grace, there would be no salvation.

We can test the spirit behind a message by seeing if it presents a one-sided view of God.

Is it all love and acceptance? Does it excuse and justify sin? Jesus did not say, "I forgive you. It is okay to keep sinning." Some have taught that forgiveness means that God no longer considers anything as sin. The problem with this view is obvious. These false teachers have substituted the justification of the sinner for the justification of sin.

The other extreme is equally as dangerous. Is it all about God's wrath and judgment? Does it bring condemnation? Paul said there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus who walk in the Spirit and not in the flesh (Romans 8:1-2).

There is a difference between condemnation and conviction. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would bring conviction to men, convincing them of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). Condemnation comes from Satan and pushes people away from God. Conviction comes from the Spirit and draws people to God.

One way you can tell what spirit is behind the message is by

which direction people are moved. Does the message draw them toward God for forgiveness and salvation or away from God because of condemnation?

The real message of the Gospel is a balanced message that declares the holy righteousness of God and the holy love of God in the same breath. God hates sin, but He loves the sinner. God will judge the wicked but extends mercy to the same sinner who responds to the Gospel message.

We discover the balanced nature of God in His plan of salvation. God is righteous and cannot excuse sin. The eternal, unchangeable law is “*The wages of sin is death*” (Romans 6:23a). However, that is only the first half of the verse. The second part says, “*but, the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*” (Romans 6:23b).

God’s holy righteousness was satisfied when He sent His only Son to die in our place as a substitute for our sin. The most famous passage in the Bible declares, “*For God so loved He gave....*”

Genuine salvation—and everything else that is a result of it—is a balance of God’s righteous nature and His loving heart. To emphasize one over the other is false doctrine.

Test #6: Is it Consistent with the Whole Counsel of God?

Paul told young pastor Timothy to study the scriptures—not just read them. Many false doctrines exist because the teachers did not consider the whole counsel of God. A sloppy exegesis (an explanation or critical interpretation of a text) has crept into the modern expression of Church. By choosing verses that agree with one interpretation and ignoring those that might say something different, teachers twist the Word of God. We should allow the entire Bible to generate doctrine.

Instead, some take pre-determined doctrine and force it into the Bible, accepting verses they like and ignoring the verses we do not like. As someone has said, you can make the Bible say anything you want it to by merely acknowledging or ignoring verses.

On the other hand, Paul tells the elders and leaders from the Church at Ephesus that he shared the entire truth with them.

Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Acts 20:26-27

Note Paul's concern. Failure to preach the whole counsel of God would cause Him (and others) to be guilty of the blood of people who were led astray by false or one-sided doctrine.

James warns the Church to be careful about wanting to be teachers. Teachers accept greater responsibility for people's souls and thus a more significant judgment (James 3:1). There is a real danger here—for the teachers and hearers.

How should we define “the whole counsel of God?” Good question. It is not just a doctrinal statement. It is an accurate representation of the plans and purposes of God. The whole counsel of God requires that the minister not emphasize one area of teaching while excluding others. For example, some ministers do not like to preach about money because people get upset. However, how we deal with money in the kingdom of God is quite important.

Others might not teach about the Baptism with the Holy Spirit, or healing, or holiness, because some do not want to hear about it. These ministers are hirelings, not shepherds. They are more interested in pleasing people than God. They are concerned with their reputations, offerings, and privileges as a minister.

The whole counsel of God considers the accurate interpretation of the text and context and how that text fits into the larger themes of the entire Bible. Paul spoke of *the “eternal purposes of God”* (Ephesians 3:11). These eternal purposes are even higher than the individual purpose God has for each of us. We must fit the purpose of our own salvation and destiny into the greater eternal purposes of God.

The false minister, led by the flesh, will tend toward messages that please the flesh, avoiding the more challenging ones. The faithful minister, led by the Spirit, will speak the truth in love. They will declare the whole counsel of God—even if it is not the popular message of the day.

Test # 7: Does it Exalt Flesh and Self?

This test has some similarities to tests #2 and #3 above. It involves discerning the result of the message or ministry. Is Jesus the center of the message or someone or something else? Where is the focus? Is it the minister, the ministry, the denomination, or is it Jesus? Does it focus on fleshly things or spiritual things? Does it produce the fruit of the Spirit, or does it cater to the desires of the flesh?

Jesus taught His disciples that they were to take up their crosses and follow Him (Matthew 10:28, 16:25; Mark 8:34; 10:21; Luke 9:23). He said they were not worthy of being His disciples unless they did. Paul encouraged young pastor Timothy during difficult times. *“If we suffer with [Jesus] we will also reign with Him”* (2 Timothy 2:12). He also counseled him to *“endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ”* (2 Timothy 2:3).

We know the flesh and the Spirit are contrary to the other and fight against each other (Galatians 5:17). In this passage, Paul

describes the works of the flesh. Along with the more glaring sins of adultery, witchcraft, drunkenness, murder, and others, he lists some we do not think about too much. While it would be unthinkable for most ministers to be involved in sexual immorality or witchcraft, Paul also tells us how the flesh can manifest itself in the ministry without us even realizing it. Some ministers exhibit these works of the flesh:

- hatred (usually caused by jealousy or strife)
- contentions (arguing and fighting with other ministries)
- jealousy (wanting what others have or being angry someone got something they wanted)
- outbursts of anger (ministers should not be easily provoked or quick to anger)
- selfish ambitions (using the ministry and its privileges for personal gain)
- dissensions (personal disputes that bring division and confusion to the Body of Christ)
- heresies (literally a person who divides and creates schisms)
- envy

This is an excellent checklist to test ministers' spirits, their doctrines, and practices. Be careful though, the first person to use the checklist on is yourself. Jesus warned about trying to take the speck out of another person's eye when we have a log in our eye.

Flesh-pleasing doctrines usually emphasize money, pleasure, or blessing. As noted earlier, some in the early Church taught Christians it was okay to practice sexual immorality and idolatry. Carnal (immature, flesh-oriented) Christians and those non-Christians among them love these messages that allow the flesh to do what it pleases while still being declared

religious.

Paul said these teachers had a “*form of Godliness*” but denied the real power of the Gospel to transform lives (2 Timothy 3:5). Paul tells us to turn away from these teachers.

There is a danger. Some get discouraged because of the hypocrisy in the Church. They turn away from the false, but they do not turn to the true. Some just quit. Others go it alone, trusting only themselves. Both reactions are wrong. They need to seek out true leaders and true churches when they discover that those they have followed are not right.

While God does want to bless us, He does not want to bless our flesh but rather our spirit. James told his readers that they prayed but did not receive God’s answers because they were wrong in what they asked for. They were lusting and trying to use God to fulfill the lust of the flesh (James 4:3).

Godly ministers—and true doctrine—will not be fleshly. The truth will speak of the blessings of God but never appeal to the flesh.

Test #8: Does it Bring Unity or Division to the Body of Christ?

Another good test of the spirits is unity or division. While true doctrine will separate the “wheat from the chaff” (Matthew 3:12), the Gospel minister will never seek to divide the Church of Jesus Christ. Some ministers like to generate division because it exalts their own ministry. As already discussed, this “*wisdom*” is ungodly and even demonic.

The Bible places a high degree of spiritual value on the unity of the Body of Christ. The psalmist describes it this way:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the

head, Running down on the beard, The beard of Aaron,
Running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the
dew of Hermon, Descending upon the mountains of Zion;
For there the Lord commanded the blessing—Life
forevermore. Psalm 133

The psalmist related unity to two things: 1. Anointing (power) and 2. Everlasting life (salvation). Where unity is, there will be an anointing and spiritual life in abundance. Where these things are lacking, there is division, confusion, and strife.

Paul instructs believers to work at maintaining unity in the Church. His admonition is in Ephesians chapter 4:3. *“Endeavor [work] to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”*

Unity requires hard work. People that purposely divide the Body are not walking in the Spirit of God. Even sound doctrine can be preached in such a way as to create division. A heart of unity or division will become evident when you listen to a Gospel worker for a little while.

People who want to divide over the smallest issues are immature, not mature Christians. Although they think they are more mature, they are not. James put it this way, *“For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.”* (James 3:16)

We understand that correct doctrine can bring division. Still, it should sort out the true Christians from the false, not bring divisions among true Christians. Paul said divisions were necessary so those God-approved teachers could be recognized (1 Corinthians 11:18-19).

Faithful ministers and true doctrine will always seek the unity of the Body of Christ whenever possible. If unity is not possible, they will seek a peaceable compromise. Those who

tend to divide the Church are not operating in the Spirit of God.

Test # 9: Does it Promote Secret Revelation and Exclusive Groups

People love to be special. They love to be in exclusive groups that make them feel more important than those outside the group. While that tendency is common to the flesh, we should not tolerate it in the Church. The early Church dealt with false teaching called *Gnosticism* that was causing much confusion and harm. *Gnosticism* means *knowledge*.

The Gnostics believed they had secret knowledge and that secret knowledge was the source of their salvation. They would not give that knowledge to just anyone. You had to be initiated into their group. That caused some problems. Christians were told they did not have all the truth and that they had to join a special group to get it. Of course, they would not tell you what you did not know until you committed to the group. By then, it was often too late to back out. We will discuss Gnosticism more in-depth in a later chapter.

Sometimes ministers will use this technique to attract followers and, as a result, financial supporters. By offering secret knowledge that forms an exclusive group, they appeal to the fleshly desire to be different from others somehow.

I knew a man who offered to reveal your “new secret name” (Revelation 2:17). Only then could you fulfill your special place in God’s Kingdom.

Others claim to know when Jesus is returning. Some claim they are the only true Church, and outside of their doctrine, organization, or revelation, there is no salvation.

Claiming an exclusive experience or doctrine is a good sign

that the movement, ministry, or message is false.

Test #10: Does it Have any Root in Historical Christian Doctrine?

Is a doctrine presented as a new revelation apart from historic Christianity? We should apply the test of orthodoxy. Orthodoxy means conforming to established doctrine. In other words, orthodox doctrine is what most of the Church has believed from the earliest days of the Church. Doctrines like the virgin birth, the divinity, and sinlessness of Christ, salvation through Jesus, etc., would be considered orthodox doctrines.

If a new doctrine comes along, we must consider what historic Christianity has handed down to us. If it violates fundamental standard church doctrine, it *might* be heresy.

We must be careful with this test for a couple of reasons. First, historic Christian doctrine has been handed down through the Roman Catholic Church. Just because the Church believed something 1500 years ago does not make it right. There is plenty of room for disagreement in some secondary doctrines. However, the fundamentals of the faith should be non-negotiable. We usually find these truths in the historic creeds of church history.

Second, the Bible tells us there will be some new revelation coming to the Church in the last days. Daniel (Daniel 12:4), Paul (2 Corinthians 12:4), John (Revelation 10:4) all heard and saw things they were not allowed to reveal at the time. These revelations are called “mysteries,” and they are reserved for a future unveiling at a specified place in God’s eternal timetable. Peter said the Old Testament prophets received similar words about the New Covenant relationship that they could not understand in their day. They understood

that they were receiving revelation for future generations (1 Peter 1:9-12).

The key is that any new revelation will not contradict the old revelation. It will add to it or bring fulfillment and completion to it, just as the New Covenant fulfilled and superseded the Old Covenant (Hebrews 8:13).

The Old Testament types and shadows (physical realities of the tabernacle, feasts, sacrifices, and rituals) found their true spiritual fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and by extension, the Church. Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Christians at Colossae:

So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.
Colossians 2:16

John the Baptist and Jesus's initial message was, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." The word *repent* literally means to change the way you think or to "think twice" or "think again." John did not say, "Stop sinning because God's Kingdom is at hand." He said, "Change the way you think because the Kingdom of God is at hand."

A totally new doctrine that does not have some root in an orthodox Christian understanding is suspect and must be treated very carefully. The tests we have been talking about should be carefully applied, and the spirit behind the doctrine discerned with God's Spirit.

Sometimes, doctrine presented as new, is simply old doctrine rejected by most of the Church centuries ago. It is just resurfacing today. Carnal men need to be different and new doctrine is a way for them to feel important.

The test of orthodoxy is one of several that needs to be applied when testing the spirit behind a message or ministry.

Test #11: Does it Lead to Sin?

The Book of the Revelation tells us that Jezebel and other false prophets taught people to sin and eat things offered to idols in the name of grace and freedom (The Revelation 2:14 and 21-22). We will discuss a popular doctrine called “Hyper-grace” in a later chapter. Hyper-grace teaches (with some variations) that since God forgives us, sin no longer matters. We can continue in a sinful lifestyle because Jesus died for us, and we are saved.

Even in the first century, people accused Paul of preaching a grace message that seemed to ignore a strict view of sinfulness. However, Paul plainly says that the Christian should not continue in sin because God’s grace that forgives us also changes us.

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Romans 6:1-2

Paul seems to get a bit sarcastic here because he asks a rhetorical question. He thinks the issue is straightforward and cannot understand how those twisting his teaching missed the point.

When we received Christ and baptized into His death, burial, and resurrection, something spiritual was supposed to happen to a person that would release them from the dominating power of sin. The grace that forgives us also changes us. No change, no salvation.

Jesus was clear in His rebuke of the Churches in the Book of the Revelation. He was going to severely judge those that

promoted sinful lifestyles in the name of Christian freedom and liberty. Peter tells us we are free, but not to use our freedom as a means of condoning sinfulness (1 Peter 2:16).

The Church has two problems when it comes to sin. The first is to condemn everyone without offering grace or help in the struggle. The second is to pardon everything without offering power to overcome sin. Genuine grace allows God to continue working in a believer's life even when they are struggling with sin.

False versions of the Gospel offer condemnation of the sinner or dismiss the seriousness of sin but completely ignore the power of the Gospel to change lives.

The Bible tells us that the “anointing breaks the yoke” (Isaiah 10:27). God said, “*Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit....*” (Zechariah 4:6).

Jesus is the Messiah in Hebrew and the Christ in Greek. Both mean “The Anointed One.” The antichrist is not just some world leader who opposes Jesus at the end of the age. The antichrist opposes the anointing.

John said there were already many antichrists in the world during his lifetime. Any person or doctrine that opposes God's power to change lives could be influenced to some degree by that antichrist spirit.

Paul warned Timothy about these false gospels.

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure

rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away! 2 Timothy 3:1-5

Many of the issues we have discussed are listed here, especially about wanting power and position, loving money, and seeking pleasure more than God.

Also, note that they denied the power of God. It was all done in the power of the flesh. The Sadducees of Jesus's day were examples of this. They did not believe in spiritual things, angels, or life after death. To them, Judaism was just a religion to be obeyed from a social point of view.

It is also important to note the period mentioned—the last days. Again, we discover the predominant spiritual weapon in Satan's arsenal. These are the weapons he is using against the Church today!

Any doctrine that says it is okay to sin is wrong. Any philosophy that promotes sin is false.

Test #12: What is the Witness of the Spirit?

John calls the Holy Spirit the *Spirit of Truth* several times in His Gospel.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you. John 16:13-14

There were some things the disciples were not yet ready to hear. Jesus tells them the Holy Spirit will give them revelation as they need it and that He would guide them into all truth.

We have a promise of the Father and the power of the Spirit to keep us from deception and error. We must learn to humble ourselves and receive the love of the truth to stay safe from the deceptive spirits being released on the earth in the last days.

We can sum up the final test like this: What does the Spirit of God tell you about it? Of course, to apply this test accurately, we must be seeking God in the first place. Our hearts must be open to accepting doctrinal correction if necessary. Some Christians tend to reject something that disagrees with what they currently believe. It would be easy to say, “My spirit does not bear witness with that doctrine or person,” simply because they say or do something with which we are not familiar.

On the other hand, some Christians are “*blown about with every wind of doctrine*” (Ephesians 4:14). They accept every new thing being preached because they have “*itching ears*” (2 Timothy 4:3).

Discerning the spirit behind people, doctrines, and movements requires that your own spirit and attitude be humble and teachable.

The Holy Spirit has a way of letting us know if something is not right spiritually. Some people have used the phrase, “I felt a check from the Holy Spirit.” Meaning they sensed something was not right, even if they could not tell you what it was.

This *checking of the Spirit* is one way we discern the mind of the Spirit in situations. We must learn to develop our

sensitivity to the Spirit's leading, depend on it, and obey it. Many times, this *checking of the Spirit* is our clue to examine a doctrine, person, or practice closely.

There is also the Spiritual gift called *Discerning of Spirits*. Paul listed this as one of nine gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians chapter twelve. The word of wisdom, word of knowledge, prophecy, tongues, and interpretation of tongues work with discerning of spirits to make up the *revelation* gifts. God wants to speak to every believer and give them information from the Holy Spirit so we can effectively administer the Kingdom of God.

Listening to the Holy Spirit and trusting Him to guide you and guard you are essential keys to your spiritual safety in these last days. Days, we are told, that will be filled with spiritual deception on every hand.

Conclusion

No one test—by itself—can give us a foolproof sense of the spirit behind a person, message, or practice. However, we can apply several of them to get an accurate sense of right and wrong in the spirit realm.

We are exhorted to examine these things. We are encouraged to test the Spirits. We are not just to ignore them. These false teachers, doctrines, and movements can and will impact the Church negatively. Already they are drawing away disciples from the truth. As Christians, we need to be ready to respond with Biblical wisdom to chase away the spiritual wolves attacking and killing the sheep.

Several false doctrines are circulating in the Church today. Another section of this book will explore some of these teachings and the problems they create. True believers must stand for truth while exposing lies of the enemy.

CHAPTER 9

TWO ERRORS CONCERNING THE BIBLE

Many people attempt to understand the Bible without recognizing the necessity of depending on the Holy Spirit. That leads to two errors.

The first is a liberal approach that questions the authenticity and authority of the Bible. It might sound like this. “Is the Bible really the Word of God.” It recalls the words of Satan in the Garden of Eden, “*Did God really say...?*” Many in this group pay lip service to the Bible but choose the parts they like and do not like. Anything they do not like is dismissed as man’s error or outdated moral codes, out of sync with modern society.

The second is a hyper-literal, fundamentalist approach which uses a Bible verse as an end-all to any discussion about any issue. This group dismisses good scholarship in favor of preconceived ideas. It might be characterized by, “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it!”

Admittedly these are some broad generalizations, and not everyone who identifies with either group may fall into the same stereotype. If it does not describe you, you are free to apply it to someone else. I will discuss the danger of these two approaches later in the chapter.

The problem with both approaches is a lack of Holy Spirit guidance.

Is the Bible the “Word of God?”

That is a question you will hear more frequently these days as the authenticity of the Bible comes under attack in greater measure. One of Satan’s primary strategies is to undermine the authority and power of the Bible in the minds of both believers and unbelievers.

To understand the reason for—and effect of—this attack, we must start with two simple, scriptural principles. The first is where faith comes from, and the second is what faith does.

So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. Romans 10:17

Without faith it is impossible to please God. Hebrews 11:6

Without faith we cannot please God. Without the Word of God (in all its various forms), we cannot have faith. We must conclude that the “Word of God” is foundational to pleasing God.

The story of Abraham is interesting. Abraham was not an Israelite or a Jew. He was a Chaldean Mesopotamian from the city of Ur in Babylon (present-day Iraq). If he had been born there today, he would be an Iraqi. Four hundred years earlier, his ancestor Noah was floating on the flood waters. Noah lived 350 years after the flood. This put him within fifty years of Abram. No doubt the family stories were still being told.

Abraham (Abram at this point in his life) was going about his business one day and God showed up. The Bible does not recount the story, only that God revealed Himself to Abraham. The apostle Paul makes an interesting statement concerning Abraham.

For what does the Scripture say “Abraham believed God,

and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Romans 4:3

Faith is not belief *in* God. Faith *believes* God. Two fatal assumptions are spiritually killing people today. The first is assuming that belief *in* God constitutes faith. While that may be a starting place of faith, it is not the Biblical type of Faith God is looking for and rewards.

James challenges his readers with a thought.

You believe in one God (as opposed to the multiplicity of pagan Gods worshipped in that era), You do well, but do you not know that the demons also believe and tremble.
James 2:19

Their belief in one God was a step up from paganism but still fell short of Biblical faith. To prove his point, James reminds them that the demons also believed in one God. A simple belief in God is not what it takes for salvation. Yet today, when asked about their religious experience, many people will say, “Well, I believe in God.”

The second error regards faith as a mere doctrinal statement. People ask, “What faith are you?” By this they mean what denominational system are you a part of? The typical response might be, I am Methodist, or Catholic, or Pentecostal. Here, faith is reduced to a systematic doctrinal statement. It is quite possible to believe all the right things and still go to hell.

Salvation is based on a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ—not subscribing to the correct set of doctrines. It is not that right doctrine is not essential; it is that correct doctrine is not the basis of Biblical faith as it relates to God. Doctrine is not the source of faith; the Word of God is. Faith

comes from what God says, not what we say about what God says. Doctrine is just our best attempt to explain what we believe about God.

Let's go back to Abraham and his experience. Paul makes a point of saying Abraham BELIEVED God. In other words, Abraham believed what God said. So much so he changed his entire life based on that belief. He packed his family, his sizable estate, and started on a journey without knowing where he would end up.

That is true Biblical faith—believing what God says to the point of basing your life on it. It means believing what God has said, even when you do not have all the answers. No matter the cost!

It is quite possible to believe *in* God without changing your life. It is quite possible to agree with a doctrinal statement and still not yield to God's will and purpose in your life. These things are observed week after week as people go to church without ever accepting the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

James tells his disciples to be "*Doers of the word and not hearers only.*" Those who hear the Word of God and did not do the Word of God deceive themselves.

How does all of this relate to the all-out attack on the Bible we witness today? Simple. If God has not spoken, there is no basis for Biblical faith.

Humanity is then left with a religious philosophy you can take or leave. Each person's interpretation of Scripture is as good as the next person's. It does not matter what you believe as long as you believe something—or so the theory goes. The prevailing attitude is, do not tell me what to believe. I will figure it out for myself.

Satan attacks the authenticity and authority of the Bible. By casting doubt on God's Word, he effectively removes the foundation for Biblical faith. Even if he cannot get someone to reject the Bible outright, the mere injection of doubt may render faith difficult at best and impossible at worst. You can see why this strategy is significant. If Satan can stop people from believing they have no other option for pleasing God.

If he can cause doubt about God's nature and character, he can cause people not to trust. If the Bible is simply a man-made book full of errors, there is no real reason to change your life to line up with it. If God has not spoken, it makes no difference what we believe.

Is this an effective strategy?

Satan used this strategy on the first people—Adam and Eve. You know the story well. God *said something*. Eat fruit from everything in the garden except that one tree. Do not eat of it. God did not give them fifty commandments or even ten. He gave them one. One instruction to see if they would believe and obey His voice (the heartbeat of genuine faith).

Enter Satan. He first agrees with God's Word—albeit He did not quote God entirely. Didn't God say you could eat of every tree in the garden? Eve corrected him by saying that was true, but they could not eat from that one specific tree because they would die.

Satan then contradicts God's Word. "*You shall not surely die.*" He then questions God's character and motive. 'God does not want you to eat of that tree because you will become like God and will be able to decide for yourself what is right and wrong. God cannot be trusted,' he hissed.

Eve fell for the devil's reasoning. By effectively undermining the authority of God's Word and casting doubt on the

character and motives of God, Satan triggered the fall into sin that we are still suffering from today.

That was an effective tactic 6000 years ago. It is still working today. If God has not spoken or is untrustworthy, people have no basis for faith.

The Bible is the Word of God. In John chapter one, the apostle starts by saying God and the Word are one. Then he tells us that the WORD was made flesh. John tells us Jesus is the manifestation of God's Word. To tear away at the authenticity and authority of God's Word is to attack Jesus Christ Himself.

It is popular in some Bible colleges and seminaries to explain why the Bible is not God's Word and cannot be trusted as such. They point to the differences in ancient texts and the abundance of translations today.

I have always thought it strange that people would devote their lives to studying something they did not believe. I cannot figure that one out. The only possible explanation is demonic deception, as Satan uses those people to destroy the faith of up-and-coming spiritual leaders. If you rob the leaders of genuine faith, you have effectively robbed their future congregations of faith as well.

It is like getting a vaccine that will keep you from getting the real disease. People get just enough tainted Biblical teaching to effectively keep them from genuine faith. Once they believe a lie about the Bible, they must first get rid of the lie and then replace it with the truth. That is much harder than not knowing Biblical truth and accepting it for the first time.

It is popular to say, the Bible is not the Word of God, but it contains the Word of God. In effect, it means that you simply cannot take the Bible as a whole. You must learn to weed out the real Word of God from men's ideas and errors.

My stepdaughter was in her early teens. She spent summers with her father, a backslidden minister. To retain some sense of God without having to be serious about following Him, he taught her that the Bible was full of errors because men wrote it. It really could not be depended on; she would have to sort through it and figure it out for herself. At the end of the summer, she came back home with her newfound revelation, and it was not long before she figured she would straighten me out.

“The Bible is full of errors because men wrote it,” she said one day. I ignored her statement and asked her to get me her math book. She did. I spent a few minutes in silence, flipping through the pages of her math book. She finally got curious and asked what I was doing. I said, “I’m looking for errors.” She said (with a snort), “You think there are errors in my math book?” I said, “Men wrote it, didn’t they?” She said, “Oh, I see.”

Why is it that USA Today, CNN, and the liberal talk show hosts all get it right, but we cannot trust the Bible?

Satan has launched a full-scale attack against the Bible because it is the source of faith and practice for the genuine Christian Church.

That said, our *interpretation* of the Bible may be suspect. After all, there are hundreds of competing doctrines. For instance, there are half a dozen doctrines about when and how Jesus is coming back—or if He is coming back at all. Christians differ over how to baptize people and even who can be baptized. I just mention a couple of obvious ones.

These differences do not undermine the integrity of the Bible itself. The Bible is true even if men misinterpret it. It merely means we need to love the truth enough to let it speak to us.

Paul told the believers in Thessalonica that God would send strong delusion on people in the last days because they did not receive the love of the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

Loving the truth can be difficult, I admit. Sometimes we do not really want the truth. It is easy to look in the mirror and see gray hair and a few extra pounds and pretend nothing has changed. Other times we investigate the Word of God and see things we might not like. Difficult subjects like judgment, hell, demons, sin, and its effect bother us. We just want God to be a doting old grandfather who loves everyone—not a Father committed to working righteousness into our lives.

It is at this point that people start trying to make the Bible say something it does not. They want God to line up with their worldview and sensitivities.

The last half of Romans chapter one tells us the downward spiral of these people. They did not want to become like God but instead wanted to make God in their own image and likeness. Paul gives this assessment in verses 20-25:

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is

blessed forever. Amen.

Notice the result. Paul says their worship became corrupted. It was not that they did not worship something. They remained religious but left worshipping the true God because He was not how they wanted Him to be. They changed God into their own image that supported their fleshly ideas.

One of Satan's great weapons is undermining the Word of God—the Bible. The Church of Jesus Christ must take a strong stand and not get sucked into the error of this demonic attack. The Bible is God's Word and the key source of faith and practice for the born-again Christian. To compromise this truth is to compromise the very foundation of the Christian faith.

Believers or Biblicists?

I want to be extremely careful in this section and clarify what I believe as we discuss the next error. I understand there is a possibility my words could be misunderstood. I do not want that to happen.

I affirm that the Bible is the Word of God. The various translations do not bother me. I think, for the most part, they help us get a fuller understanding of the richness and depth of God's intentions toward us. That said, I do not accept or support every translation. Some are good, and some are bad. There are some I would not recommend to people. Neither do I depend on a single translation but often consult multiple translations, as well as lexicons and word studies by scholars with much more education and experience than I have.

I affirm that the Bible is the source of faith, as mentioned in the previous section. Faith comes in response to God speaking, both in the Bible and through the Spirit of God. You and I do not serve a dumb (mute) idol, as the pagans did.

The Bible is unique and does not need to be changed. John the Revelator warned against adding to or taking away from the words of His prophecy. I would be willing to extend that to the rest of the Scripture as we have received it throughout history.

That said, neither did God stop talking 2000 years ago. Jesus said, *“My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me.”* I believe in the validity of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in our day. That includes the word of wisdom, word of knowledge, prophecy, tongues, interpretation of tongues, and discerning of Spirits. I believe that God gives his people dreams, visions, and revelations, as Peter affirmed in Acts chapter two.

None of these things should take away or add to the Bible. They are meant for understanding and guidance as each generation of Christians seeks to follow and apply the Word of God in their time and culture.

I do not believe the gifts of the Spirit will contradict the original Word given by the same Holy Spirit nearly 2000 years ago.

I affirm that the Old and New Testaments give us a clear revelation of how and why God saves us. I also affirm that the New Covenant supersedes the Old Covenant and that we no longer live under the Old Covenant’s demands and dictates. (You will have to read Hebrews a few times to get this understanding.) A person cannot live under two covenants at the same time. Paul makes this abundantly clear. I explain this more fully in the chapter on Legalism, the Sabbath, and the Hebrews Roots Movement.

As someone once said, “The Bible doesn’t need to be reinterpreted, it needs to be reread.”

Having affirmed my absolute confidence in the Bible as

authentic and authoritative, I want to address another error some Christians make. That is to become Biblicists.

Biblicism is the opposite pendulum swing from a liberal denial of the authority of the Bible. Biblicists go the other way and support a hyper-literal interpretation of the Bible. They place the same emphasis and authority on the Old Covenant as they do the New Covenant. Notice, I did not say the Old Testament and New Testament.

Biblicists tend toward legalism. They focus on sin and judgment. They demand that Christians live within a system that promotes self-righteousness. They have many rules and are critical and judgmental towards the world and other Christians. They approach the Bible as a rule book. Many Biblicists would consider themselves to be fundamentalists. Fundamentalism in any religious system (there are Islamic fundamentalists too) tends to move people toward exclusiveness and extremism.

You might hear the Biblicist say, “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it.” In other words, they are saying they have the only correct interpretation of the Bible, and if you disagree with them, you are not Christian.

Lest you think I am being unduly critical I will share my story. I was truly born again through the ministry of a Fundamental, Independent Baptist Church in July 1980. We were taught that we were the only true Christians. We had ironclad Bible-based reasons why the Methodists, Pentecostals, Catholics, and everyone else could not be true Christians. Although we grudgingly acknowledged the salvation of Southern Baptists (because they had Baptist in their name) we insisted they were liberals. Fundamentalists alone were the true guardians of God’s salvation. I was blacklisted after I received the Baptism with the Holy Spirit. The pastor told me, “You have

gone downhill ever since you left my church.” If he could only see me now!!!

The Biblicist forces a Bible verse into every situation as if quoting it ends all arguments.

I knew a man who was a preacher. He would write letters to the editor filled with Bible verses, and he thought he was swaying opinions. He was not. The problem with this approach is that, for many people, the Bible has no authority. It would be like a Marxist quoting Marxist doctrine to a Christian and expecting it to end an argument.

Biblicists tend to choose one version of the Bible and discount the rest as heretical. We see this is the “King James Only” movement. These Christians claim the only acceptable version of the Bible is the Authorized 1611 King James Version. While I agree there are some bad translations and paraphrases out there, to say, the KJV is the only correct version is wrong.

You might hear a Biblicist say, “I don’t interpret the Bible; I just take it for what it says.” That might be a valid statement if the Bible was being written today to a person living in twenty-first-century America.

However, the Bible is not and was not. The New Testament was written between AD 45 and AD 95. It was written to a people living in a near eastern culture highly influenced by Greek and Roman thought and culture. The Bible is two millennia and half a world away from modern American thinking and culture.

To say that you simply “take the Bible for what it says” would mean you have an advanced level of understanding in near eastern languages and culture. It means you understand the mind of the Jew and how God flavored every aspect of their

lives for 1500 years through the Law of Moses. It would mean you understand both Greek and Roman culture and how they thought, being pagans. I will explain this a little better in the next section.

While the Bible is relevant for every age and culture, it requires some understanding of the setting in which it was first conveyed to interpret it accurately for today

The most significant problem with Biblicism is that it tends to promote worship of the Bible, not the worship of God. Not too long ago, a brother on Facebook was criticizing people who used an electronic Bible. A real Bible had to be paper and ink, and preachers should use a real Bible when preaching from the pulpit. Oh really? What makes a Bible a Bible? The words it contains or the materials on which it is recorded.

“Thou shall have no other Gods before me....” is the Word of God regardless if the words are chiseled in stone, penned on a parchment scroll, printed on paper, or displayed on a computer screen.

Only the Ten Commandments chiseled in stone could function as the real Ten Commandments if Biblicist logic carried through. I trust I made my point. Paper and ink do not make a Bible. The Words of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit do.

Paul must have been alluding to this when he penned these words.

You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart. The Spirit, Not the Letter

And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. 2 Corinthians 3:2-6

Paul tells the Corinthian believers that the letter (the written Word of God) without the Holy Spirit kills people. That is the essence of legalism, a fatalistic adherence to the words of the Bible, without the life-giving Spirit of the Bible. Jesus repeatedly confronted the religious leaders about their attitude concerning the Old Testament scriptures.

In the New Testament, we find an object lesson that needs to be taken to heart. We have already established that the Bible declares Jesus to be the “*Word made flesh.*” He was the manifest Word of God. Yet, the Jewish leaders rejected the “*Word made flesh,*” preferring instead their interpretations of the written Word and their traditions surrounding it. They could not hear the voice of the shepherd because they worshipped their interpretation of the Word more than God Himself.

Jesus told them they had robbed God’s Word of its power through their traditions. (Mark 7:13) Another time He told them to search the Scripture because they thought they had eternal life through them. He told them the scriptures testified of Him.

I admit there is an exceptionally fine line here in how to understand these things. Somewhere between the liberal rejection of the Bible’s authenticity and authority and the Biblicist view that takes a legalistic approach to the Word of God lies a balanced application of Biblical truth.

The difference is the power of the Holy Spirit to bring light and life to the Word. Both liberal and legalistic interpretations ignore the aspect of the Holy Spirit in the Bible and the life of the believer.

We must acknowledge the authenticity and authority of the Bible without making it a legalistic book of rules to be obeyed. The physical words of the Bible must be illuminated and revealed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Only then will they bring life instead of death.

Consider the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). Jesus called them *“Foolish and slow of heart to believe.”*

He walks with them and explains the scriptures they knew so well. When He left them, they said, *“Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?”*

While they were well versed in the Old Testament scriptures, they still did not understand them. It was through the power of spiritual revelation that something changed. Jesus said, *“The words I speak to you are spirit and they are life.”*

Biblicists tend to emphasize the Bible without the Spirit. According to Paul and Jesus, this produces death and not life.

Without a doubt, the Bible is both the foundation and center of our Christian lives. To experience life in the Spirit we must be very careful not to fall into the ditch on either side of the Biblical road.

CHAPTER 10

LEGALISM, THE HEBREWS ROOTS MOVEMENT, AND SABBATH-KEEPING

In the next few chapters, we want to look at a few of the false doctrines impacting the Church of Jesus Christ in our day. It is important to remember Jesus's warning.

False christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. Matthew 24:24

As previously discussed, these end-time deceptions must look remarkably similar to Biblical truth for them to tempt Christians to accept them.

Manifestations of supernatural power will attend these false doctrines, supposedly lending validity to them. Satan has always been a spiritual counterfeiter. Jesus said that supernatural signs would follow believers attesting to the truth they were preaching (Mark 16:7-18). Satan will attempt to mimic the actions of the Holy Spirit.

When Moses confronted Pharaoh with supernatural signs, Pharaoh's magicians could do many of the same things. Of course, there is always a limit, and the Holy Spirit will always win.

The danger is that without Biblical foundations and spiritual discernment, many will be deceived because of these

powerful signs. People in western countries that do not typically believe in supernatural power will be easily swayed because it is unusual. Without a Biblical anchor, they will accept these signs as a validation of what is being taught.

Tribal people in countries that are used to spiritual manifestations will be just as likely to be influenced. Therefore, the key is to know the Word of God and reject that which does not line up with it.

If someone came along and said, ‘Jesus isn’t God. That statue represents the real God,’ not many true Christians would be tempted to follow such teaching. The danger is in deception that looks like truth, sounds like the truth, and has some desirable elements. Remember the devil’s strategy in the garden of Eden.

I have often used the analogy of putting a worm on a hook to catch a fish. The fish thinks he is getting something good for him. But the fisherman has other plans and motives. So, it is true in the spiritual realm also. If Jesus recruited disciples to become *fishers of men*, you could expect Satan to do the same thing.

What bait would tempt you to bite on Satan’s hook?

Legalism

Legalism is the term used to describe living under a regulatory code—in this case—the Law of Moses.

A large segment of Christianity thinks this refers to the Ten Commandments. However, the Mosaic Law had 613 commandments and ordinances. It governed every element of the Israelite’s private and social life. It was a heavy burden. I am not sure about you, but I have trouble with ten commandments, let alone 613.

Legalism comes in two forms. The first is a moral code, and the second is a religious expression—or ceremony and ritual.

Religious people like rules and rituals. They want fancy religious trappings like robes, incense, and candles. They like their ceremonies—which mean nothing to God and add nothing to our spiritual lives. Now there is nothing wrong with any of these things—until they become traditions that supposedly take on spiritual power and gain equal status with the Word of God. Every denomination has its traditions. You will quickly find out how important they are when you suggest changing one. That is legalism. There is a set way to do things regardless of if it is Biblical or not.

Legalism says righteousness comes by keeping rules and traditions. Grace says righteousness comes through faith in Christ. You cannot mix the two.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

For many years I was taught and believed that the works Paul referred to here were religious works—those special things we do for God. Then ten years ago, I learned the truth. God considered a work to be anything we did in the flesh. Do you have a hard time with this? Consider the Sabbath rule. You shall do no WORK on the Sabbath. In other places, it was defined as *labor a servant would do* (Leviticus 23:7, 25, and 35; Numbers 28:18 and 25).

Building Fences Around the Scriptures

Over the centuries, the Jewish teachers, scribes, and priests added their man-made doctrines and interpretations to the Scripture. The Rabbis had a unique strategy for making sure people did not sin. They called it *building a fence around the*

Law. They added boundaries to make sure people did not cross the line. You might call it a buffer zone to ensure you did not get too close to the line. Think about a barrier fence three feet from the edge of a cliff.

Just one example should prove a couple of the points I am trying to make. The Law said you could do no *work* on the Sabbath. Although the Bible did not have a rule for it, the Israelites thought walking too far on the Sabbath Day was work and thus a sin. (You should notice that *work*—according to the Law—was not just religious activity, but normal activities that exerted energy.) Moses did not specifically say how far you could walk, so they had a problem. How far could you walk and not sin?

They had a law, but no conditions. So, they made up a rule. It was called “a Sabbath Day’s Journey.” This was the legal and moral distance you could walk on the Sabbath day without sinning. Initially, the Rabbis set it at 2000 cubits (3000 feet or 914.5 meters).⁵ Centuries later, a different interpretation of Hebrew scripture doubled it to 4000 cubits. Later still, in the New Testament era, they again changed the distance to 8000 cubits. They reasoned if you walked 4000 cubits to get to the temple, you would need to walk 4000 cubits to get back home to complete the round-trip journey.

You see how they added a man-made rule to the Law. Then, they changed it—twice!

⁵ This man-made rule was taken from Joshua 3:4 where God told them to keep a space of 2000 cubits from the Ark of the Covenant when the priests led the Israelites into the promised land. Later the priest interpreted the word place not simply as the campsite, but the place where you lived in a city, which allowed them to increase the distance they could walk to get to the temple or synagogue and back. Of course, this 2000-cubit rule did not exist in the Bible even though they used a Bible verse to justify it.

Do you see how legalism works? In the beginning, if you walked 2000 cubits on the Sabbath day, you were righteous. If you walked 2001 cubits, you had broken the Sabbath Law and were a sinner. At what point does that extra cubit negatively impact your soul?

The second point is the early Israelites were sinners if they walked 2001 cubits. Later, after they reinterpreted the rule, a Jew could walk 4000 cubits—and finally 8000. So, did God change His mind? Did He have to apologize to the sinners He judged before the rule was reinterpreted twice? Was (is) there a sliding scale for sin? I think not.

None of those distances was a sin. I think the point is that Sabbath was in your heart—not a legal rule to observe.

I mentioned earlier I was saved in a Fundamental, Independent Baptist Church. They had lots of man-made rules for sin. For instance, a woman could not wear pants or shorts, or she was a sinning. However, it was okay to wear culottes (shorts that looked like a skirt) if you went somewhere a dress might cause you to be immodest.

They also had a standard that a woman's dress had to be below her knees. I thought this was kind of strange since one hundred years earlier, a woman would be considered a prostitute if her dress did not reach her ankles.

When did God change his mind about the proper length of a woman's dress? Does sin change with social styles? Obviously, some Christians think they do. However, what God called sin will always be sin, and what He did not call sin will never be sin. The shifting sands of our progressive societies or religious institutions do not change that fact.

The extra burdens laid on people angered Jesus. He sternly rebuked these religious leaders.

He answered and said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written “this people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.” He said to them, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.... making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do.” Mark 7:6-13

That was a strong rebuke. Notice the legalists had added man-made traditions to the Law (*building a fence around the Law*), and the traditions become more important than the Law itself. Churches and denominations do the same things today. Programs, worship styles, dress codes, wearing jewelry, and other external things are more important than Scriptural teaching.

Jesus said they worshipped with their lips, but not their hearts. He said they “*worshipped in vain*” and called them hypocrites (literally actors wearing a mask). Notice His conclusion. They robbed the Word of God of its power to change their lives.

Keeping the Sabbath

This issue is one of the key areas of false teaching Satan uses to confuse the Church today. Those who demand we keep the seventh-day Sabbath are working hard to convert others to their doctrine. They are especially attacking the Pentecostal churches in third-world countries where they have a strong foothold due to illiteracy and limited Bible training.

Two problems allow the Sabbath-keepers to confuse Christians and lead them away from evangelical churches.

The first is because of limited Biblical training and understanding, some pastors and church members have a hard time refuting these false teachers who say you must keep a Saturday Sabbath rest.

The second is the only argument that is considered is what day of the week to worship. Christians—who worship on Sunday—have no Biblical support for doing so. Meanwhile, the Sabbath-keepers can quote many scriptures that say Sabbath-keeping is an eternal command from God. If we do not take a different approach to the question, the Sabbath-keepers will continue to win the argument.

The Bible is noticeably clear that Christians under the New Covenant are not required to keep the Law of Moses with its unique practices such as circumcision, dietary laws, and the Sabbath.

While there are several scriptural passages I could point out, I will only use two in this section. In another teaching booklet titled The True Sabbath: The Sabbath is not a Day it is a Person; I go into much more detail about the issue of the Sabbath day and Christians being set free from the Law of Moses.⁶

In the first century, Paul's Gospel message of grace was being undermined by the Jewish legalists who insisted Christians had to keep the Law of Moses. That included circumcision, the Sabbath, and dietary laws. To them, the death of Jesus only did away with the need for animal sacrifices, a person

⁶ Get my free booklet, The True Sabbath, by going online to my website at www.stevehighlander.com/sabbath/

still had to keep the other requirements of the Mosaic Law.

Paul constantly encouraged new Christians (both Jew and Gentile) that the old requirements were no longer valid or binding on Christians who placed their faith in Christ. Consider his position when he was encouraging the Christians at Colossae.

Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. Colossians 2:16

You need to understand two things here. First, all the things Paul referred to were strict Jewish regulations under the Mosaic Law.

Elsewhere, Paul tells the Christians that circumcision is a sign of the Old Covenant, not the new one. Paul completely dismisses the Jewish regulations by saying (a few verses above this one) that Jesus took the Law of ordinances (the rules of the Mosaic law) that were against us out of the way, nailing them to His cross. He specifically included Sabbath days.

The second point is Paul's referral to the Jewish ordinances, rituals, feast days, temple, and other things as "shadows." A shadow is not a reality but a dark outline of something real. There is no substance to a shadow. As real as the physical temple, the feasts, the Sabbaths, circumcision, and other things were—they were without substance compared to the ultimate spiritual reality found in Jesus Christ Himself.

Paul says the *body* casting the shadow is none other than Jesus Himself. Every shadow pointed to the fact there were a light and a body. The shadow is never the most important thing—the body casting the shadow is. Paul is telling

Christians the Old Covenant elements all pointed to a higher reality that could be found in Christ. Now that they could see the reality, they no longer needed to place an emphasis on the shadow.

The third point we need to see is how the early Church handled the issue and answered the question. The issue of Gentiles keeping the Mosaic Law was a serious debate in their day. The very first general church council was called to address this very issue. We read about it in Acts chapter 15.

They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, “You must be circumcised and keep the law”—to whom we gave no such commandment—it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. Acts 15:23-29

The entire apostolic council, the church eldership, and others debated the issue, prayed, and decided what seemed good to the Holy Spirit and them. They did not require Gentiles to keep the Mosaic Law, including circumcision, Sabbath, dietary laws, feast days, or anything else that was such an essential part of the Law of Moses.

Notice two things about those who were teaching that Gentiles must keep the Law. These teachers were not authorized by the Apostles to teach that, and they were “troubling and unsettling” the Gentiles.

You will also note that the apostolic council only placed four prohibitions on the new Gentile Christians. Four! Not ten, or fifty or 613. Four!

Anyone who insists on keeping the Sabbath (or other Old Testament requirements) as a means of being right with God is scripturally wrong and opposed to the original apostles of Jesus Christ. In fact, they are troubling and unsettling the Church.

Much more could be said about the issue. There are other considerations when answering the arguments of the Sabbath-keepers, but this should be enough for any serious Bible student to understand the plain teaching of the early (predominantly Jewish) Church.

As Christians we are not obligated to keep a seventh-day Sabbath, however the Old Testament picture does point to a spiritual reality in Jesus we do need to experience. Jesus invited the world to come to Him to find rest for their weary souls. Souls that had been worn out from trying to keep religious laws.

In effect, Jesus is the Sabbath for every true believer who has ceased from working for salvation and trusts in the mercy of grace of God for forgiveness and cleansing. In this way the Christian fulfills the Sabbath every day of the week.

The Hebrew Roots Movements

The Hebrew Roots Movement (HRM) is particularly tricky and needs to be distilled properly to separate truth from some

serious error. I want to talk about the positives and negatives associated this movement.

In broad terms, The HRM (sometimes called the Jewish Roots Movement or the Christian Jewish Roots Movement) is an effort to help the modern churches—influenced by a western worldview—return to a proper understanding of the early Church and Gospel message.

Jesus was a Jew. He was not just the Gentile’s Savior. He was the Jewish Messiah. He was an Israelite and a Hebrew.

These terms can be a bit confusing for some Christians. The Israelites were originally called Hebrews. The name means *traveler* or *wanderer*. Abraham was called the first Hebrew because God called Him to travel or wander from his home in Ur to the place God would show him. The Bible tells us Abraham believed and obeyed God (Hebrew 11:8).

In this sense, Christians, who are of faith with Abraham, are wanderers in this world. That would make us Hebrews—in the literal meaning of the word. The writer of Hebrews points this out when He says we are strangers and pilgrims looking for a home (Hebrews 11:13-16). Peter uses the same theme when he says, “*Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul...*” (1 Peter 2:11).

Later, God called Abraham’s grandson Jacob and changed His name to Israel. Jacob (or Israel) was a Hebrew. Israel had twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel, which became the nation of Israel. The original people called Hebrews were now Israelites.

Later the nation split into two separate kingdoms. Ten tribes formed one kingdom that walked away from God. These tribes were collectively called “Israel.” The other two tribes

(Judah, the Levites, and half of Benjamin) stayed more or less faithful to God for a time. The ten tribes were conquered by the Babylonians and scattered throughout their empire. They are sometimes referred to as the *ten lost tribes* because no one can really point to them with any tribal or national identity today.

The Tribe of Judah stayed faithful to God for a little longer, but their rebellion against God caused them to be defeated by the Babylonians. To put an end to the political rebellion, the Babylonians exiled the people, tore down the temple, and destroyed Jerusalem's walls.

The people went into captivity only to return after seventy years of exile to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. After the nation returned from the Babylonian captivity, they were known as *Jews*. The term *Jew* is a derivative of the name of Judah. The people of the nation of Israel were not known as Jews until after they returned from captivity around 500 BC. Now you can understand how the terms Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews refer to God's original people, but in unique ways.

First the Positive

First, we want to look at the positive elements of the Hebrews Roots Movement.

Today, the Church in the western world is far removed from the 2000-year-old culture of the Near East in which the Gospel was birthed and first preached.

One of the first principles of Bible interpretation (Hermeneutics) is that we must understand the text as it was presented to the people of the day in which it was written.

This means that we must have a good understanding of the language, culture, and social issues during the time frame and

geography in which the New Testament came into being. In other words, we must understand the Bible through the minds of the people who heard John, Jesus, and the early apostles speak.

John tells us, “*Jesus came to His own.*” Jesus was Jewish. “*His own*” were Jews. We are told Jesus was “*born under the Law*” (Galatians 4:4). Jesus was a Torah observant Israelite. The Jews had a history with God stretching back 4000 years. They had been a covenant nation under the Law of Moses for 1500 years.

Jesus was the Jewish Messiah before He would become the Gentile Christ. He came to fulfill the Old Testament promises of God to the Jewish nation. After that, He would open the door for the Gentiles (Acts 15:14) to join Israel as “*one new man*” (Ephesians 2:14-18). This new man would be neither Jew nor Gentile but a new, spiritual race of people.

Jesus told the Samaritan women that “*salvation was of the Jews*” (John 4:22). The Gospel message was first preached to the Jewish nation in a Jewish context. The words and phrases Jesus used were rooted in their national identity, covenant relationship, and the Law.

The Old Testament verses were well known in their historical context. Jesus used the culture of the day to preach the Gospel. His parables were stories the first-century Jews understood within the context of their own life experience and understanding—framed by the Old Testament.

Many of the gospel stories took place in the context of the Old Testament feasts. One example of this is the story that takes place on the last day of a feast.

On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to

Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. John 37:37-39

While we can glean some important information from this passage, if we do not understand the context in which the story is told, we miss some very important information that the Jews of Jesus’s day would not have missed. What feast was John referring to? What is the *last great day of the feast*? Did anything unusual happen on this day to make Jesus’s words more significant?

Taking this at face value, we understand that Jesus would be the one to pour out His Spirit in the near future. We also understand that the Holy Spirit would work through His Church to satisfy a thirsty world.

What we do not get is context. The feast John referred to is the Feast of Tabernacles, the last of seven annual feasts. The special ceremonies and sacrifices of the Feast of Tabernacles specifically pointed to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the salvation of the Gentiles.

The *Great Day of the Feast* referred to the eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles. It was the last day of the final feast in the yearly cycle of seven feasts. During this eight-day feast, the Jews performed a special ceremony called the Water Drawing Ceremony. It was associated with Isaiah 12:3, which says, “*Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*” It should be noted the word for *salvation* here is Yeshua—or Jesus in Greek.

Another interesting fact is the association of the words Siloam

and Shiloh. These words have a dual meaning: sent and peace or tranquility. When prophesying over his sons, Jacob (Israel) said this of Judah:

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people. Genesis 49:10

This prophecy tells us that Shiloh (one sent in peace) would be the last King of Israel. Of course, this refers to Jesus and sheds even more light on the Water-Drawing Ceremony on the last, great day of the feast.

The context of our story is starting to make more sense. The water that was drawn from Shiloh (Jesus) and poured out at the altar was representative of the Holy Spirit to be poured out on all flesh. Now we can pick up the back story that is not mentioned in the Bible.

A priest drew water from the pool of Siloam in a golden pitcher. He would then pour this water out at the base of the sacrificial altar. Although the Jews did not totally understand it at the time, this ritual represented the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh as prophesied by Joel (2:28-29), with the fulfillment recorded in Acts 2:17-18.

When the priest did this, the entire temple would fall silent. That would have been the perfect moment for Jesus to cry out in the temple, inviting people to come to Him and drink. Otherwise, Jesus's voice would have been drowned out in the cacophony created by thousands of worshippers milling around the temple.

The significance of Jesus's actions would have struck the Jews. He was claiming to be the priest who would pour out, not water—which was but a symbol—but the Holy Spirit who was the reality. He also associated Himself with the term

Shiloh (Siloam).

Jesus was telling the people of His day that the prophecy was about to be fulfilled. Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, the Savior of the world, the Prince of Peace, and the Baptizer with the Holy Spirit. The Jewish mandate of reaching the world with the Word of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit was about to be realized.

Although they did not really understand what that meant at the time, they could not have failed to realize that to what Jesus was referring.

On the Road to Emmaus, Jesus “*opened the scriptures*” to the disciples, causing them to understand many things they were still unclear about (Luke 24:32). Later He would spend forty days teaching His soon-to-be apostles about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

There are many more references to the Old Testament stories, rituals, and feasts scattered throughout the New Testament. Paul told the Corinthian Christians:

Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. 1 Corinthians 5:8

To which feast was he referring? What did the Jews understand by Paul’s statement? They had kept this feast annually for 1500 years—it dated back to the story of their exodus from Egypt. The feast He was referring to was the Feast of Unleavened Bread and, by association, Passover.

Paul states that Jesus is our Passover, and we are now to keep the feast in a new way. Under the Law of Moses, anyone who ate leaven that week would be shut out from the salvation of

God. Paul is now saying if their hearts were filled with malice and wickedness, keeping the feast, and refraining from leaven no longer meant anything.

The real leaven was the sin which dwelt in a person's heart and life. The physical yeast was simply a symbol. But without understanding the traditions of the feast you could not apply the New Testament spiritual principle.

I could offer many similar examples showing the need to understand the Hebrew cultural context in which the Bible was written.

The entire book of Hebrews requires a good working knowledge of the Old Testament since it shows how the New Covenant supersedes the Old Covenant in every way.

The writer deals with Israel's history, the exodus from Egypt, and the giving of the Mosaic Law. Details on the priesthood, feasts, sacrifices, and temple are major subjects of the book of Hebrews. Hebrews was written to show them how Jesus fulfilled and exceeded the Old Covenant. While we can understand some things without knowing the Old Testament, the depth and riches of this book are discovered only in a Hebrew context.

One key goal of the HRM is to help Christians regain a perspective of the original scriptures as the first-century reader understood them. Placing the scriptures in the original cultural context opens the Bible to a whole new degree of understanding for western Christians. The Church profits in two ways. First, we are rewarded with a greater understanding of the Word of God. Second, it addresses issues of poor interpretation when the original context is understood.

Seventeen hundred years of western thought and culture

have molded the 21st century Church. Modern Christians—especially in the west—interpret Scripture as if it were written to them in a contemporary setting. However, our worldview is utterly foreign to the original worldview of first-century Jews. Because of this, the Church misses many elements that have a significant impact on how we understand, interpret, and apply the Word of God today.

A good result of the HRM has been to help the modern Christian understand their Bible in the proper setting—a 2000-year-old Jewish one.

I believe that a working understanding of the Old Testament is necessary to interpret the New Testament correctly. That is one thing the HRM does. The key to balancing these things is *understanding*, not practice. We need to understand the New Covenant in proper relationship to the Old Testament. We do not need to return to practicing any part of the Law of Moses in a physical sense. Jesus fulfilled those things and brought a spiritual understanding and application to us through the New Covenant. The Old Covenant is no longer in effect for Jew or Gentile.

The Error of the HRM

Having stated the positive results of the HRM we now need to look at the problems that it can create. These potential problems are why we need to distill the teachings and practices of the HRM to separate truth from error.

There is a strong tendency of the HRM to revert to Old Testament Judaism. Of course, not everyone who follows the HRM does this. However, the pull is there, and it requires a lot of Biblical understanding, spiritual maturity, and discipline to stay in the realms of New Testament grace.

Legalism offers no stopping point. Once you start to live by

rules and regulations, there always seems to be one more thing that will make you more righteous or holy. The entire system of religious works and ritual crawls out of the tomb where Jesus buried it and starts to live again—even stronger than before.

Consider what Jesus told the rich young ruler. Keep in mind Jesus deals with him from the legalistic Jewish perspective the man has.

The young man asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus said, you know the Ten Commandments. The man replied that he had kept them from his youth up.

Yet, the man felt something was lacking and asked Jesus what it was. His legalistic mindset caused him to think there was one more thing he needed to do to have eternal life. Even though he knew and kept the Law, his conscience nagged him because he knew there had to be something missing. No one ever was or ever will be saved by trying to keep the Law of Moses.

That is the nature of legalism; do one more thing, and you will get it right. Jesus answered him according to his current philosophy. Sell everything you have and follow God.

We know that selling your stuff will not save you. Jesus was not telling him it would. Jesus explained that the legalistic approach to God would always require one more thing—until there is nothing left to give.

Over the years, I have personally known several individuals and churches who have followed the HRM. One of two things happened to every one of them. They either got out of it and returned to a New Testament expression of Christianity, or they went deeper and deeper into Old Testament Law, works, and ritual.

A failure to properly understand the New Covenant caused them to place the same emphasis on the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant—and everything that went with it—was superseded and replaced by the New Covenant. It is not that the Old Testament is not important. It is. It is that we live under a New Covenant. You cannot live under two covenants at the same time.

It is essential to understand the difference between the Old and New Testaments and the Old and New Covenants. A covenant is a spiritual operating agreement God makes with man.

The thirty-nine books of the Old Testament contained and explained the Old Covenant's terms and conditions. The old Testament recorded how the Old Covenant worked through history before Messiah died and rose again.

The Old Testament was completed four hundred years before Christ when the book of Malachi was penned. The Old Covenant continued in effect until AD 70, when the Jewish Temple was torn down by the Romans, effectively ending the Old Covenant forever.

The New Testament contains and explains the New Covenant God made—first with Israel and then Gentiles (Romans 1:16). The Old and New Covenants do not have the same authority over Christians. We can see this clearly in several passages of Scripture, especially throughout the book of Hebrews, which was written to show how the New Covenant is better than the Old Covenant in every respect.

The writer of Hebrews sums up his thinking in several key passages.

For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding

fault with them, He says: “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah— not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord.”
Hebrews 8:7-9

Notice the words *first*, *second* and *new*. The fact is there are two covenants—one is old, and one is new. The Old Covenant is no longer a valid operating agreement. The writer of Hebrews made this clear. He likened it to a *last will and testament* made by a man concerning his property after his death. If the man writes a new last will and testament, the previous one (old will and testament) is no longer a valid legal document; the new one supersedes it immediately when the man signs it. The final last will and testament goes into effect immediately upon his death—it makes no difference how many versions there were before the last one (Hebrews 9:16-17).

Now consider his argument in verse 13:

In that He says, “A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

Look closely at what he says. He is interpreting what God meant when He said a “New Covenant.” The Old Covenant is obsolete and ready to vanish away. Something obsolete has been replaced by something more modern or of better quality. The Old was ready to vanish away. Something that has disappeared is no longer seen, like a cloud, steam, or smoke. Here for a while—then gone forever.

That is the nature of the Old Covenant and all things that pertained to it—including the Law of Moses, the temple, the rituals, the sacrifices, the Sabbath days, New Moons, feasts, circumcision, and the dietary laws. A New Covenant replaced all these things. You should also note the New Covenant was not made “according to the Old Covenant,” God made when He took the Israelites out of Egypt and gave the commandments on Mount Sinai.

The book of Galatians was written to the Christians in the new churches Paul planted in the region of Galatia. Law-keeping Jews followed Paul around and corrupted his message of grace by saying Christians had to keep the Law of Moses—including circumcision and the Sabbath—to be right with God. In this letter, Paul is correcting this false teaching.

I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died in vain. O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? Galatians 2:21-3:3

Paul says the Law of Moses cannot save us. Salvation comes through faith in Christ. It is the Holy Spirit’s work, not of man’s religious self-effort, as it was under the Law.

He tells them they are foolish to believe they start in the Spirit, but must go back to fleshly, religious self-effort to finish what the Spirit began. According to Paul, our flesh cannot perfect us in any way.

For as many as are of the works of the Law are under the

curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” Galatians 3:10

Paul states that those who keep the Law must keep the whole Law—all 613 commandments. People cannot pick and choose which parts of the Law they want to keep and those they wish to ignore. Later in the letter to the Galatians, Paul says if a man is circumcised (as a sign of being under the Old Covenant), he is obligated to keep the whole Law (Galatians 5:3). James tells us that if you keep the entire Law and stumble at one point, you are guilty of violating the entire Law (James 2:10).

You see, you could not just pick a few parts you wanted to keep and ignore the rest. The agreement was that you would keep the whole Law, all the time. If a man did not keep the whole Law, he brought a curse on Himself. When God offered the Old Covenant, He pronounced a blessing for those who kept it and a curse for those who did not. The nation of Israel accepted those terms. Read Deuteronomy chapter twenty-eight for the story.

Paul reminds the Galatian Christians that Jesus set us free from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us. Many more passages clearly state that Christians are not obligated to keep the Old Testament Covenant.

We have a New Covenant we operate under today. You cannot mix the two because they are totally different covenants based on different terms and conditions. Religious and moral perfection form the basis of the Old Covenant. Faith in Jesus Christ forms the basis of the New Covenant. Paul told the Galatians if the Law saved us, then Jesus died for no reason.

The Potential Danger of the HRM

The danger of the HRM is the tendency to revert to a works-based religious expression found under Moses's Law. It usually starts with one of two issues.

The first is that we can no longer refer to Jesus as "Jesus." We must call Him by His Hebrew name, Yeshua—or perhaps Yahushua. While these names are the correct Hebrew or Aramaic pronunciations, there is nothing wrong with calling Him Jesus, which is simply the Greek version of His name. Suppose someone wants to call Him Yeshua (Yeh Shoo a) that is fine with me. However, many in the HRM have begun to claim if you call Him Jesus, you are not a true believer or are calling on a different Jesus. Somehow mispronouncing His name really makes Him mad.

In his online blog article [Jesus? Yeshua? Yahushua? Which is the 'real' pronunciation?](#) Gary Shogren, missionary and professor of New Testament, states:

"Yes, many Messianic Jews and some Gentile Christians call the Lord, Yeshua; that's great, so long as they don't claim that only their pronunciation is legitimate or even that its use brings them closer to God. Others preach about Jesús (hay-SOOS) to Spanish-speakers, and Jesus to English audiences. In Italy, it's Gesù. In Turkey, İsa. The Chinese confess their faith in Ye Su. And do you know what? The Lord is not confused; He is smart enough to recognize his name and hear his people, despite the thousands of accents and alphabets around the world."⁷

That is wisdom. Remember that men like to be religious and religion wants to be exclusive. There is absolutely nothing in

⁷<https://openoureyeslord.com/2013/02/28/jesus-yeshua-yahushua-which-is-the-real-pronunciation/>

the Bible that demands we pronounce His name in one specific way. The truth is, God has been responding to prayer in the Greek version of the name of JESUS for nearly 2000 years. Can people really be so deceived to think that suddenly, they come up with the right pronunciation, and 2000 years of answered prayer was a mistake on God's part?

The problem is not what you call Him. The problem occurs when we make legalistic rules required for a believer to be right with God or receive special favor.

We are justified by faith in Christ, nothing else. To say that somehow our improper pronunciation of His name takes us out of our relationship with God is an extreme error. Again, it is not the pronunciation that is the issue. It is the man-made, legalistic requirement that is in error.

The second area where Christians start to get off track is Sabbath-keeping. When they begin to discover Christianity's Hebrew roots, it is easy to get swept up in keeping the Sabbath.

Many Messianic congregations do worship on the Sabbath or Saturday night after the Sabbath ends at dusk. For many Christians, who are attending those services to learn more about our Hebrew roots, it seems very normal. Keep in mind that none of those things adds anything to our Christian lives. Jesus is our all in all.

Paul tells us that keeping one day over another—or none at all—has no spiritual impact on our lives. His conclusion: if you keep a special day—either the Sabbath Day or Sunday, do all to the glory of God.

One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the

Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. Romans 14:5-6

Paul concluded that each Christian should be true to what they believe but should not judge others by their personal convictions. His instruction on the issue is found in verse twelve: *“So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore....”* It should be noted that the context of Paul’s instruction was Jewish dietary laws and the Sabbath.

The issues we discussed above are two of the doorways leading to legalistic bondage. These issues create a potentially treacherous slope leading away from God’s grace.

The HRM can potentially damage new believers or those that do not yet have a solid Biblical understanding of the difference between the Old and New Covenants. In fact, HRM teachers quote a lot of Scripture that seems right, but they are out of context. Of course, they avoid teaching the things you have just read. A lack of scriptural grounding, combined with the power of deceiving spirits, allows Christians to be led away from the pure Gospel of grace back into a system of religious self-effort.

It is no wonder this is happening. It was Satan’s strategy 2000 years ago to keep the infant Church from walking in the incredible liberty of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17).

In conclusion, we need to take a serious look at Paul’s warning in Galatians 5:1-6:

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a

debtor to keep the whole Law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by Law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

Paul uses very clear, very strong language to warn the Galatians who were being led astray by the Jewish legalists. He contrasts the liberty found in Christ with the bondage found in the Law.

He reminds us, if we try to keep parts of the Law, Christ profits us nothing. To keep part of the Law means you must keep the entire Law—all 613 commandments. To attempt to find justification through the Law is to be estranged from Christ.

Elsewhere he says no person can be justified by the Law (Romans 3:20 & 28). Strong's Greek lexicon defines the word *estranged* in part, this way: "to cause a person or thing to have no further efficiency, to cause to cease, put an end to, do away with, annul, abolish."

Looking for justification through any part of the Law means you are done with Christ and render His power ineffective in your life. It is either Law or grace. You cannot mix the two. They are like oil and water.

He concludes by saying that such a person has "*fallen from grace.*"

Then Paul uses another strong word. *Avails!* This word has to do with ability and effective power. Paul says there is no longer any power in the elements of Old Covenant. Real spiritual power is now found in faith working through love.

Circumcision was THE sign of the Old Covenant. It was more important than keeping the Sabbath. A Jew who was not circumcised was not a part of God's covenant (Genesis 17:9-14). Paul, once a radical follower of the Law of Moses, totally disregards this necessary sign. Why? Because we are no longer operating under the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant was annulled. The sign of that covenant was no longer valid. If the Old Covenant's main sign is no longer required, what about all the other things contained in that covenant?

False Old Testament Nationalism

Another significant deception is an attempt to mimic Old Testament nationalism. That is the idea that God wants to raise up new nations like Israel. Those who believe this wish to change their countries and societies to conform to the Old Testament patterns followed by the nation of Israel. They cite scriptures such as Psalms 35:12:

Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people
He has chosen as His own inheritance.

While this is true in general—God will bless a nation that follows God—it is actually referring to Israel's nation. The qualification was God's choosing of the nation. The Bible says Israel is that nation. God does not choose geopolitical nations today. He calls people from every nation, tongue, tribe, and people to be a part of His Kingdom nation. Taking this Scripture as a blanket promise to any nation that practices the Old Testament principles of government and religion is entirely out of context.

Under the New Covenant, God is no longer working with geopolitical nations. The Church is the people of God and the nation of God. In the Old Testament God worked through a single nation, in a single geographical location. However, that

was never his full intent. It was a temporary measure—like all Old Testament types and shadows—pointing to a reality realized in and through Jesus.

Peter declares this truth in no uncertain terms.

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy. 1 Peter 2:9-10

Let us unpack this Scripture. The first thing we need to see is whom he is addressing this passage. He is writing to those “*who once were not a people, but now are the people of God.*” That would indicate the Gentiles since the Jews were the people of God. So, Peter is writing to Gentile Christians who became the people of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Peter tells these Gentile Christians (the Church) they are the people of God, a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a *holy nation*, and peculiar people.

These are designations initially given to the nation of Israel (Exodus 19:5-6).

It would help if you also understood that Israel was to be a nation *of* priests, not a nation *with* priests. (Read that last sentence again.) There was one addition to these designations. Under the Old Covenant, there could never be a royal priesthood. The priestly line came from the tribe of Levi, and the royal line came from Judah. It was impossible to have a royal priest.

Of course, this points to Jesus and the New Covenant, where

Jesus is prophet, priest, and king. Something that was not possible under the Old Covenant. Once again, the Bible points out a significant limitation with the Old Covenant.

The one exception to this rule was King David who, as a type of Christ, operated as prophet, priest, and king, even though he was not of the tribe of Levi. The uniqueness of this situation should cause the serious Bible student to stop and consider what God is trying to point out. David is the only man in the Old Testament (under the Law) who typified the New Testament grace experience.

All of this pointed out that Jesus was the “Son of David” and heir to the Davidic Covenant God made with David to set a king on his throne forever. That king would not just rule over Israel, but the earth and, ultimately, the entire universe. The issue was more significant than the nation of Israel.

Peter now defines the Church as the *nation of God*. While the Jewish people and the physical nation still have unfulfilled prophecies and promises, God looks at the entire Church (saved Jews and Gentiles combined) as His nation now. When Israel forfeited the Old Covenant, God realized his eternal plans and purposes through the Church.

Israel was to be a “*kingdom of priests*.” The entire nation was to be a priesthood to the whole world. They failed and forfeited that right when they said they did not want to listen to God directly at Mount Sinai. They asked Moses to hear from God for them and then tell them what God said.

In doing this, they forfeited the national priesthood. Instead of becoming priests, they ended up needing priests to mediate between them and God. The Church of Jesus Christ must not make the same mistake in our generation. We are the priesthood of God; we do not need a man-made priesthood.

Under the New Covenant, the Church is the nation of God (1 Peter 2:9-10), and every born-again believer is a priest (1 Peter 2:5). God finally realized His original desire in and through the Church (The Book of the Revelation 1:6). The King James Version says Jesus made us “kings and priests.” The passage is more correctly translated as a “kingdom of priests.”

All of this points to the fact that the nation God is blessing today is the worldwide Church of Jesus Christ, operating under the New Covenant. (Of course, God still works out His prophetic purposes through the nation of Israel.)

Because of these things we must reject the false idea that God is looking for a new geopolitical nation built on Old Covenant principles and laws.

This return to Old Testament nationalism might appear to be Biblical but only to those who do not understand the difference between the Old and New Covenants. It is simply another attempt by Satan to get the Church to revert to Old Testament legalism and the bondage she was set free from through faith in the crucified Christ.

Understanding our Hebrew/Jewish roots is vital to a proper understanding of the Bible and Christianity. The danger is the religious spirit inherent in humanity that is not enlightened and empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit. This old nature loves religious activity, ceremony, rites, and legalistic requirements—because it is something the flesh can do to be religious.

None of these things truly impact the spirit of a person. None of these things produce salvation or a closer relationship with God through the Spirit. Consider what God said to Israel through the prophet Isaiah.

“To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?” Says the Lord. “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams And the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, Or of lambs or goats. When you come to appear before Me, Who has required this from your hand, To trample My courts? Bring no more futile sacrifices; Incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies— I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; They are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear.” Isaiah 1:11-15

It is plain to see God never wanted all the religious ceremonies and trappings. They were a temporary physical sign always meant to point to Christ. We can also see how easy it is to be religious without being godly. Sinful men can do all the religious stuff to make themselves feel better, but God sees through it all.

The Bible clearly teaches, “*By the works of the law no flesh is justified*” (Romans 3:20 & 3:28). “*By the Law*” he means the moral code and the ceremonial rites and rituals prescribed under the Old Covenant.

A return to Old Testament practice in any form is a return to legalism. Paul told the Galatian Christians when this happens; we fall away from grace (Galatians 5:4). In other words, a person is left to find justification with God through religious self-effort—which has never saved anyone.

To finish this section, I want to emphasize another thought. Paul challenged the Galatian Christians. Jewish legalists from Jerusalem followed Paul around, attempting to undermine

His message of grace. Their goal was to return Jewish believers to obedience to the Mosaic Law and customs. They also wanted the Gentiles to convert to Jewish observance of the Law. That was especially true in the province of Galatia.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is a response to churches who had been confused by these false teachers. These Christians were being taught to revert to a legalistic approach to God. Paul asks several rhetorical questions to get these Christians to think about the issue for themselves. Questions they had probably not considered before.

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the Law, or by the hearing of faith? Galatians 3:1-5

Paul uses two strong words here. One is *foolish* or *unwise*. The return to legalism is ridiculous. The second word was *bewitched*. That indicates a spell or incantation. There was demonic power attached to these doctrines that caused hearers to accept the deception. The return to Judaism and the Old Testament law is dangerous, but there is a strong spiritual pull in that direction.

Under the Old Covenant, nobody was filled with the Holy Spirit. Those that worked miracles did so by faith in the New Covenant, not by keeping the Old Covenant. Then Paul reminds them that they began in the Spirit. He asks how they

are going to be made perfect by going back to the Law. Notice he relates keeping the Law to *the flesh*, not the Spirit.

It is worth noting that no one experienced the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament (except John the Baptist who was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb).

Under the Old Covenant the Spirit came upon people as an external anointing—symbolized by the physical anointing of oil. It was not until Jesus died and rose from the dead that men could *receive* the Holy Spirit (John 20:20). Likewise, the Spirit's anointing under the Old Covenant was limited to the offices of the prophet, priest, and king. Yet, God intended to pour out His Spirit on all flesh. Only through a new covenant could this be realized.

There is a strong appeal to the flesh to revert to Jewish legalism and ritual. People attempt to use the Bible to justify these things. Of course, they are not considered in the correct relationship to the New Covenant.

The religious nature of man wants to do religious activities and feel good about them. They do not, however, impact the soul and spirit of man.

Paul tells his own story in this regard. He boasts that, according to the Law, he was blameless (Philippians 3:6). However, he hated Jesus and was killing Christians. Jesus considered this persecution as something directly aimed at Him. On the road to Damascus, He asked Paul the question, “*Why are you persecuting me*” (Acts 9:4)?

Paul concludes his thoughts in Philippians by saying he no longer wanted the self-righteousness he claimed through the Law, but he now wanted the imputed righteousness of Christ, which was given to him through faith (verse 3:9).

While we need to understand our Christian heritage, the scriptures, and our Christian experience from the original Jewish perspective, it does not mean we should revert to Old Testament legalism in any way, shape, or form. That is an indication of both flesh and demonic deception.

CHAPTER 11

MESSAGES THAT WENT TOO FAR

Most false doctrines have at least some element of Biblical truth encased in the error, much like gold ore is polluted with other minerals that must be refined to render the beauty and value of the pure gold.

Often, throughout the Church's history, doctrines have surfaced which went too far in their teaching or their implied importance. While they may have dealt with valid, scriptural subjects and issues, they became dangerous because they were over-emphasized and ignored other scriptural teachings.

I began my pastoral ministry in 1985. The charismatic movement had started in the early 1960s. It was a genuine move of God's Spirit, restoring the Charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit to the mainline denominational churches. Suddenly Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, and members of every denomination were speaking in tongues and experiencing the gifts of the Holy Spirit found in First Corinthians chapter twelve.

The five-fold ministry gifts were also restored. No longer was the Church led by just pastors and evangelists. The ministry gifts of teacher, prophet, and apostle were released and received in the Body of Christ. Many of the old denominations had lost the power of the Holy Spirit, resulting in some bad doctrine. Messages of faith, prosperity, healing, and

deliverance from demonic bondage began to liberate the Church once again.

However, due to human nature, some of these messages were taken to the extreme. Since the preachers and messages were popular, people started following—and supporting—their favorite teachers. Much of the Charismatic movement became financially and ego-driven—for both ministers and their followers.

As time went on, the messages became unbalanced and unhealthy, spiritually speaking. The emphasis on one doctrine meant other scriptural issues were minimized or ignored. When this happened, the genuine faith of people began to erode, especially when the results were not forthcoming. Many left the Church with the words, “You just did not have enough faith,” ringing in their ears.

The problem was not their faith; it was the exaggeration of the messages that were not balanced with other scriptural truths. Material blessing and the comfort of the flesh become the goal for a significant segment of the Church. According to these teachers, to suffer in any way indicated a lack of spirituality.

Some of these excessive teachings simply catered to the flesh. They made a person’s happiness, wealth, and comfort the primary focus of the gospel. Let us be honest. It is easier to get more people to follow you (and ultimately give money to your ministry) if you tell them what they want to hear. Tell people how God will make them rich, and you will get a following—at least for a few years.

Many preachers and teachers used manipulative schemes to get people to give to them. They promised hundredfold returns on any offering. They offered personal prayer or

prophecy to those who would donate to their ministries.

Advertisements appeared in magazines selling a personal prophecy to anyone sending a donation. I heard of one well-known, traveling preacher who would have a personal prayer line for anyone paying \$500 for him to minister to them.

We need to consider something significant. Did Jesus really suffer and die on a cross to make us rich? Is that really the heart of the Gospel message? Any serious Christian would have to say “no!”

While God does promise blessings to His people, they are secondary to the spiritual things God wants to do in our lives. Consider what Paul told the Ephesians.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. Ephesians 1:3

Notice what the blessings entail. They were spiritual blessings in spiritual places. That does not negate the fact of God’s temporal blessings on earth. Most Christians would consider themselves to be blessed at one time or another. The truth remains if God wanted to bless us solely in the material realm, He did not need to send Jesus to die for it.

An over-emphasis on the material blessings of God damaged Christianity in two ways. First, it took away from the real spiritual message and kept many people anchored in the flesh.

The prosperity teachers taught that wealth—and all the material things that went with it—was the sure sign of God’s favor in a person’s life. So, they saw the more money they had and the more expensive things they acquired as a direct reflection of God’s approval.

You can see the problem this caused. Rather than seeking God, they sought after money as a means of proving God was pleased with them. Gaining wealth replaced holiness, and some went to very ungodly means to do just that—all in faith.

Billions of dollars were spent on fleshly excesses when people around the world were starving for food and the word of God. Millions of dollars were spent on fancy cars, expensive watches, houses, and other material things to please the flesh and stroke Christians' egos. Too often, the prosperity teachers were the only ones getting rich.

One minister asked his supporters for donations to buy a private jet. He said he could fly around in the heavenlies and do spiritual warfare.

Soon it became a competition to see who had the nicest suit or most expensive watch. Many ministries were destroyed because of these things, and many followers were disillusioned. I believe Jesus wept over the greed, envy, and carnality that had distracted His Church from her true mission.

There is a portion of truth in all the things we are about to discuss. The ore needs to be refined by the Holy Spirit's fire to remove the impurities before it is pure again.

When John the Baptist declared Jesus would baptize us with fire, he did not mean we would be extremely passionate about Jesus. A person may be "on fire for Jesus," but John was not referring to this. The baptism of fire burns out all impurities and reduces burnable things to ash. In other words, it purifies and refines everything it touches.

My sole intent, in this section, is to release the truth from impurities with which it has been associated.

The Prosperity Message

One teaching that went way too far was the prosperity message. Prosperity teachers taught that God wanted every Christian to be wealthy as a sign of God's blessing and favor. The preachers themselves—at least the popular ones—became wealthy from the tithes and offerings of their followers and the sale of books and materials. While God does desire to bless His people, the prosperity message was way out of line and produced much damage in the Body of Christ. They ignored a key scripture in the pursuit of wealth.

If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing . . . of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself. Now godliness with contentment is great gain. 1 Timothy 6:3-6

Even in Paul's day, people were teaching that being a Christian was a way to get rich. That is one reason why every New Testament writer warned about these financial frauds. They were just in it for the money—even in the early Church. Wisely, the Bible admonishes, "*the love of money is the root of all evil.*" The prosperity message played directly to those struggling with this worldly lust.

Paul's point is that the Father wanted godliness in His people above all other things. Blessings were secondary to character. Many throughout Church history resorted to wicked deceit to make money from the people of God.

Martin Luther was a Catholic Priest credited with starting the Protestant Reformation in 1517. The final straw for Luther

was the selling of indulgences to pay for new cathedrals. The Pope commissioned a man named Tetzl to travel through the land, offering to sell indulgences to anyone who would pay for them. An indulgence was forgiveness offered before sin was committed—in other words, it was a license to sin without consequence.

The Catholic Church said that sin could be forgiven, in advance, by paying money. Catholics also believed in Purgatory. If a Catholic died with unconfessed sin in their life, they would have to personally suffer in Purgatory for some time to *purge* that sin. For the Catholic, Jesus only paid for the sins that were confessed. In Catholic thinking many friends and family were suffering torments in Purgatory before being allowed into heaven.

The Pope had declared that anyone could instantly release a loved one from Purgatory by buying an indulgence. You could end dear old grandma's suffering with an offering. The offerings poured in.

This doctrine, among others, sparked the rebellion against the Roman Catholic Church, resulting in the Protestant Reformation.

Perhaps the Pope had never read in the Bible that we are not redeemed with corruptible things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Jesus (1 Peter 1:18).

The Bible does not say money is the root of all evil. It tells us the love of money—or greed—is the root of all evil. That is the dividing line many Christians failed to see in their pursuit of prosperity. Gaining wealth became the one sign of God's favor on a person.

Of course, this was appealing to fleshly Christians who were chasing material wealth in the wealthiest nation on earth—

the United States. The American ideal of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness blended nicely with the prosperity message. Many people can no longer separate the Gospel of Christ from the American Dream of prosperity. They are not the same.

As a young pastor, I had to deal with several people who believed and preached this message. If you disagree with them, they will shut you off and label you as not having any faith. I have had friends get up and walk out of services if you said anything against this message.

I saw a big problem. The ones who were believing the message were rarely prosperous. If they were, it was because they already had money. One friend who adamantly preached the message worked odd jobs, drove an old car, and owned an old house.

Another pastor who preached this message told me he did not have time to have coffee with me because he did not get paid to be a preacher and had to work his farm to make a living. Both men would break fellowship with anyone who disagreed with them.

Several couples who believed this false prosperity doctrine come to mind. I will only share one story, though.

John and Susan (not their real names) came to our church. They empathetically believed the prosperity message. John came to work for the local radio station since he had a music background. Prior to landing in our town, they had traveled across the country, running up a huge credit card debt along the way. The truth was, they had used all their credit cards to the limit.

John came to me about his financial situation. He said he had listened to messages and read all the books and still was not

prospering. He was struggling in His faith. I suggested he put up all the books and messages and just read the Bible for a month. After all, faith comes by hearing God's Word—not someone's message about God's word.

At the end of the month, he told me he was leaving the church and moving out of state. He had gotten in trouble and stolen some things from his employer, and they wanted to file criminal charges against him. The real reason he called me was to tell me how my counsel to stop reading the prosperity books and just read the Bible had been the worst thing possible. According to him, he struggled in his faith because he was not being encouraged by the prosperity teachers. He ended up stealing to pay his bills. He really rebuked me and blamed me for his illegal activities.

REALLY!?! He could not draw faith from God's word. Reading the Bible without extra commentary resulted in him stealing? I think the issue was a lack of basic Christian discipline and discipleship. I have never heard from 'John and Susan' again.

I have often thought if the prosperity teachers believed what they taught about the hundredfold return on offerings, they would send me \$100 since they are guaranteed \$10,000 in return. It seems like a quicker, more sure way to raise money if you ask me.

Prosperity was not the only flesh-pleasing message going around. The prophetic and apostolic movements in the United States created a culture of celebrity leaders. Some of these leaders had people who carried their briefcases and catered to their needs. They drove expensive cars, had huge homes, and even bought jet airplanes to travel around. All with the donations of their followers—who never bothered to hold them accountable.

These all seem like contradictory messages to the ones that Jesus taught. He said, if you wanted to be the greatest, become a servant—not a celebrity.

Many Christians flocked to hear the prophets speak, hoping to *get a word from the man of God*. Like the false prophets referred to in both the Old and New Testaments, these people only speak good things to those who follow them.

Even today, if you listen to some of the big names in the movement, it is all about how God is getting ready to pour out some blessing, open a spiritual portal, or release a fresh anointing. Everything is in the future—except the offering, which you should send today.

If you look back at the movement’s history, you will see the same prophecies have been spoken for years.

With that, I want to affirm that there are real prophetic gifts and real prophets operating today who do not tend to extremes. However, they are usually not as popular.

The Bible tells us the flesh and the Spirit are opposed to each other. Using the Bible to justify pleasing the flesh is a problem. I am not talking about the general truth that God wants to answer prayer and generally bless His people. That is true. The problem occurs when the message becomes the main message and the only thing people pursue.

These teachers laughed at the spiritual virtues of sacrifice and even suffering for the gospel’s sake. Holiness took second place to acquiring wealth. Jesus’ warning was never mentioned in these messages. *“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”* (Luke 6:24) Jesus was not against wealth; He was against people whose goal in Christianity was to get rich.

Touchy Ministries

People are quick to stop any criticism with the go-to verse for things like this. ‘Don’t Judge.’ Another favorite is, “*Touch not my anointed and do my prophets no harm*” (1 Chronicles 16:22).

Of course, the ones who quote these verses most often are the prophets themselves—or their followers. While the scriptures have instructive value—we need to be cautious about criticizing genuine ministries—they do not apply to everyone who calls himself a prophet or an apostle.

Interestingly, the only things the Bible told us to judge were ministers and prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:29). Jesus said we would know the nature of ministers by their fruit.

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’ Matthew 7:15-23

Jesus made several points here that we need to understand. First, real ministry produces spiritual fruit. He refers to souls

being saved, the Kingdom of God is advanced in the world, growth and maturity happening in the Church, and ministries being birthed and sent out.

A considerable following, television ministry, books, and podcasts do not count as spiritual fruit. Fruit is a positive spiritual effect on the lives of those to whom they minister.

Once, Jesus saw a fig tree with leaves—meaning it should have had fruit since figs bear fruit before they bear leaves. Jesus cursed the fig tree, saying that no one would ever eat from it again. It withered and died overnight (Mark 11:12-21). That seems a little excessive, don't you think?

Why did the fig tree provoke such a response from Jesus? Jesus knew that the fig tree was not a fruit producer. To leave an unproductive tree meant it would steal the nourishment and water from good trees.

Of course, He did this as a spiritual object lesson. Interestingly, the famous passage about getting whatever you say directly responds to the disciples marveling at the fig tree being cursed. However, what they never talk about is the context of the story.

The story takes place over two days. On day one, Jesus curses the fig tree. That night he cleanses the temple, turning over the tables of the money tables and the merchants selling things in the temple. The next day the disciples see the withered tree.

The point of the story, in context, was that the temple was not bearing spiritual fruit. It had become a den of thieves, and it had stopped producing anything. The temple story, connected to the fig tree, was a prophecy that would come to pass a little more than forty years later with the destruction of the Jewish Temple. The Old Testament system of worship

and redemption came to an end forever because it was not producing fruit. No man would eat of the Old Covenant again once the temple was gone.

The Old Testament religious system had been turned into a money-making racket, and God decreed an end to it—forever!

Remember, I believe wholeheartedly in prophetic and apostolic ministry today. I am not against the faithful ministries; I am against the false apostles and prophets who use their ministries for personal gain while lulling the Church to sleep with soft messages.

These priests of the popularity cult are more concerned with pleasing men than pleasing God. These things are not new. We find several places in the Old Testament where the prophets of God confronted the false prophets who were misleading Israel. Usually, the message was, “Hey, you are God’s people; nothing bad will happen to you. God wants to bless you.” Sound familiar?

As discussed in an earlier chapter, these false apostolic and prophetic teachers were usually motivated by money, offering prayer or prophecy for a reward. That is one sign that you need to be cautious about a ministry. A workman is worthy of his hire, but those who use the ministry to manipulate offerings are in dangerous territory.

Jesus made another point concerning true and false ministries. It is also an essential test to determine the nature of the minister. He points out you generally do not get good fruit from plants that have thorns and stickers. I do not think He used this picture without purpose. If you get too close to a plant with thorns, you will probably get poked. The thorns are the natural defense system of the plant.

Likewise, there are many ministers that you cannot get close

to. Pride, insecurity, and jealousy cause them to keep the people around them at a distance. They are afraid their character flaws, secret sins, or ungodly practices might be exposed. The flesh does not like feeling vulnerable. A lack of humility and godly submission is missing in these ministers.

Fellowship is one of the most basic Biblical and spiritual values. Yet, these thorn-bearing ministers do not have real friends. They never really open themselves up and share what is going on in their lives. They may act like they are your good friend, but, on closer inspection, you will discover you are not really their friend. The relationship is very one-sided. Often the false minister will be the one who controls the relationship, and, without that control, they have no connections.

People who try to get close, or challenge the lack of openness, will get *poked*. These leaders use control and intimidation to stop people from challenging them. Sometimes they hinder the ministry of those who question them. As a last resort they will blacklist those who do not fall in line.

The message is clear: if you get too close, I will defend myself. One tell-tale sign of these ministers is an inability to have true fellowship with them—without getting poked.

The Faith Message

The Prosperity Message grew from another message that went too far: The Faith Message.

There is nothing wrong with faith. In fact, without faith, you cannot please God (Hebrews 12:6). The truth is faith is not the same thing as the *Faith Message*. Many who started in faith went too far and got off into doctrines that caused spiritual damage.

Starting in the 1960s and gaining popularity through the 1970s and 80s, the Word of Faith movement taught that you could do or have anything you wanted with enough faith. It was centered in the confession message. Kenneth Hagan began to teach about confessing or speaking out whatever it was that you wanted. Other prominent teachers perpetuated the message.

So Jesus answered and said to them, “Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them. Mark 11:23-24

Of course, Jesus said this—and there is truth in His words. The Word of Faith movement ended up taking it too far, though, as people moved in the flesh trying to make it work. They taught that you could have whatever you say. The catchphrase was “name it and claim it.” Or “confess it and possess it.” Some, finding the excesses a bit humorous, turned it into a joke, “blab it and grab it.”

Again, there is a truth in speaking what you honestly believe. God spoke the world into existence. There is power in our words.

Two errors caused the message to be taken to the extreme. The first was a denial of reality. You could not say you were sick—even if you were on your deathbed. You had to confess that you were well.

Something happened one day that emphasized this point to me. I went to visit a friend and knocked on her door. It was

obvious she had a terrible head cold and congestion. She was so stuffed up she talked funny. I said, “Wow, you really have a cold.” She said, “No, I do not have a cold; I am well.” The fact was she did have a cold. Saying she did not have a cold did not make it so. In fact, how would I get healing if I never admit I am sick? Jesus never asked one person to confess their healing. He asked them to place their faith in Him.

Faith does not deny reality; it overcomes reality through the Word and character of God. There was another major problem with the Faith Message. Anytime it did not work, the person was told they just did not have enough faith—because faith and confession always worked.

That message burned many Christians who gave up when it did not work for them. Some turned back to a powerless expression of doctrinal Christianity. Others left the Church convinced God did not care or was not trustworthy.

That does not mean it never worked, but it became a system of self-effort where you had to say and do the “right things” to get God to move.

Stop and think about the ramifications of this teaching. God will not do something for someone unless they say the right things—and continue to say them—until He determines that enough confession or faith has been released. That is more akin to witchcraft than the Kingdom of God.

Then, there is the other side of the issue. It came to the point where a person could not say anything negative, or the devil could latch onto it and create that negative reality in their lives.

There are two problems with this doctrine. The first is it places all the power on the person who is speaking. It also gave the false impression that Satan could gain access to a

Christian's life simply because they did not say the right thing all the time. While Christians can open demonic doors in their lives, it is not as simple as saying the wrong thing, especially accidentally.

Some Christians, preaching and practicing the Faith Message, turned it into a kind of *Christian witchcraft*. Witchcraft is based on saying the exact words the right way and doing the right thing the right way. God does not operate on these principles. The Holy Spirit does not respond to spells and incantations like demons do. You do not control the Holy Spirit by saying and doing the right things in some prescribed manner.

I know a brother in the Lord who is consumed with the faith message. He walks around repeating a mantra of scriptures combined with confessions. It has become nothing but meaningless repetition. Jesus warned His disciples about vain repetitions when they asked Him to teach them how to pray. The Word of God is not a formula to control anything. It is a source of faith in God, His promises, and His character.

The Faith Message produced a legalism all its own. To be able to have faith, everything had to be absolute. They taught it was always God's will to heal, bless, and answer every prayer we prayed.

I heartily affirm God wants to heal, bless, and answer prayer. The default answer to prayer should be YES! God said the response to every promise in Christ was already yes (2 Corinthians 1:20). However, we are also told that there are some reasons why our prayers do not get answered. If I am not getting a YES answer to my prayer after a while, I need to back up and seek God for the reason why. I do not need to assume it is just a question of more faith or confession.

I have often said that prayer should work *in us* before it works for us or through us. I think this was the missing element of the faith/confession message. No thought was given to how God might use the situation we were praying about to produce a change in us while waiting for the answer to manifest. The only thing that mattered was the answer—which had to be what was spoken.

The Faith Message took away from the sovereignty of God. It discounted the fact that God may have had other issues in play. It minimized personal responsibility. It did not consider what was being asked for might not have been in the will of God. James told his readers that they prayed and did not receive because they asked the wrong things for the wrong reasons (James 4:3). God will not cater to the flesh and the lusts of men—even if you believe it and confess it.

The other problem with the Faith Message was it ended up being used for personal gain. I never heard one message about using faith for the Kingdom of God. I never heard one of the teachers claiming souls or other spiritual results for the Kingdom of God.

Someone pointed out the message became “faith in faith,” not faith in God. A prominent faith teacher used to say that God had to have faith in the power of His own Word. That is a twisted interpretation of the Bible.

The faith message was extremely popular, and millions of Christians got swept up in it at one time or another. The Faith Message ended up producing unrealistic expectations based on the flesh.

Individualism and a Lack of Submission to Genuine Leadership

The Charismatic Movement created another problem that

went too far. The restoration of the Spirit's gifts brought prophecy, the word of knowledge, and the word of wisdom back into the Church. In short, every born-again Christian has the right and privilege to hear from God through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "*My sheep hear my voice and they follow me*" (John 10).

Once again, Christians who had not learned to deal with their flesh took this to the extreme. If they could hear from God, they reasoned, they did not need anyone else to speak into their lives. Neither did they want anyone to judge what God might be saying to them. When an attempt was made to bring accountability or correction, it was stopped short with "I heard from God."

These believers sought to walk with God outside the bonds of true fellowship and submission to a faith community. They might go to a church, but they would never submit to leadership. When they were asked for commitment or to submit to some leadership decisions, they would just change churches—or do their own thing altogether.

The Bible places a high priority on community. The Biblical concepts of community and fellowship were not just about being friendly to one another and eating a meal together occasionally. They carried with them the idea of investing in each other's lives, of being connected vitally, not superficially.

Koinonia—the Greek word for fellowship—meant sharing. It was a close-knit, give-and-take relationship within a community of people. It included accountability and willful submission at times. The genuine Biblical concept of Church has no place for disconnected—or loosely connected—members.

Me-and-Jesus, is the battle cry of these independent

Christians. The truth is they do not want to connect because they do not want accountability.

A pioneer spirit built much of America. That spirit was a steely resolve to individual accomplishment. That individualism continues to play a significant role in the country today. Just about everything is customizable. Look at our computers and electronic devices, for example. There are dozens of settings to customize them to make them uniquely yours. Almost everything in American culture screams individualism. A popular hamburger chain advertised their burger with the jingle, “have it your way.”

That American individualism overflowed into the Church in the 1960s and found fertile ground in the Jesus People Movement and early Charismatic Movement.

That is not so much a false doctrine as it is a false spiritual philosophy of approaching life in a faith community. Jesus died to create His Church—the spiritual Body of Christ on earth. His purpose was to express His fulness through a many-membered body of believers (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4).

To miss this point is to miss the very purpose of God. God did not want a bunch of individuals doing their own thing while waiting to go to heaven—He wanted a corporate Body that would bring heaven to earth.

I will be the first to admit that walking in close fellowship with a group of Christians is not an easy task at times. There is give-and-take. It requires humility, faith, submission, and other troublesome virtues with which we struggle. But isn't that what true Christianity is all about? Isn't developing Christ-like character the goal of Christianity? Shouldn't we be learning to walk in humility and mutual respect? The Body of

Christ is about discovering we are a small part of a much larger whole.

I live and minister in Papua New Guinea. There are about one thousand ethnic tribes and over 830 languages. Tribalism is alive and well and flavors the whole social life of the people.

At Jackson's International Airport in Port Moresby, there is a large photo of a man dancing in traditional tribal dress. The message says, "We dance to disappear into something bigger."

Interestingly, in much of the world, dancing is a group affair. The dances have been choreographed for decades or centuries and passed down through the generations. Most of these tribal people would not understand dancing as individuals or even as a couple (unless they have the Internet and YouTube).

Yet, in America, people dance by themselves or with a single partner all the time. If you do not have a partner, you can still go out on the dance floor and have at it. Once again, we see the power of individualism that has permeated America and, by extension, the American Church.

Individualism is not a Biblical value. King Solomon provides a bit of wisdom in this regard.

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, For he has no one to help him up. Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; But how can one be warm alone? Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

We cannot overstate the value of community from a Biblical worldview. One key issue powering individualism is lack of agreement. Some people just do not like to agree with anyone. They find something to argue about, and that gives them a reason to remain out of fellowship. The prophet Amos asks a rhetorical question, “*Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?*”

Agreement is an important issue. However, I believe that unity is a higher virtue in the Kingdom of God. I can be in unity with you about Kingdom priorities. We can find ways of working together even if I do not agree with you on every issue. Truthfully, I do not know many people that I do totally agree with—and I am sure I do not make the top of many people’s agreement lists.

I was in a church sharing about our mission work in Papua New Guinea. It was a different denomination from mine, although the pastor and I were good friends and had done some ministry together. At the end of the presentation, he took an offering and said, “Steve and I have some differences of opinion on some things, but I know him, and he is a true worker for God. I encourage you to support him.”

Disunity or lack of agreement was one of the negative results of the Protestant reformation. As much as the Catholic Church needed to be reformed, they still attempted to maintain a unified Church.

All of that was lost when the Church splintered into hundreds of denominations worldwide. The current count is around twelve hundred Christian denominations in America alone. Disunity rules the Church. Yet, the power of the Holy Spirit is found in unity. Is it any wonder why the Church has lost ground in recent years? Individuality and disunity have replaced the Biblical values of community and fellowship.

Paul even addressed a private dispute in the church at Philippi. “*I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord*” (Philippians 4:2). How would you like for your church squabbles to be recorded as an example for millions of people worldwide?

Do not fall into the trap of individualism. The power of the gospel is found in faith communities working and praying in unity to advance the Kingdom of God. The power of synergy is never more apparent than in the Church of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught the power of unified prayer and agreement (Matthew 18:19).

There are several dangers in the “me-and-Jesus” approach to Christianity. One of the main ones is the possibility of spiritual deception when there is no accountability in revelation and ministry.

The Discipleship Movement and Excessive Control

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a movement emerged that was called the *Discipleship Movement*. It was also known as the *Shepherding Movement*. The prevailing idea was that leaders were shepherds. Pastor is the English word for shepherd. Shepherds tend sheep, and sheep were dumb. They need to be herded, or so it was thought.

The shepherd was much smarter than the sheep, so it only made sense that the shepherds or leaders needed to make all the decisions. Several popular leaders were involved in promoting and practicing it, so it grew into a considerable movement.

During that time, many people from old-line denominational churches like the Catholics, Methodists, Episcopalians, Baptists, and others were experiencing the Baptism with the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. There arose a need for

genuine discipleship. Many of these new Charismatic Christians left their old denominations to experience the newfound freedom in the Holy Spirit. The discipleship movement emerged as these people began gathering in new, non-denominational churches or groups that were loosely connected around specific teachers.

While authentic Biblical discipleship is a vital part of Christian growth, this movement went too far. It invested all the power in the leadership. In extreme cases church members could not buy a car, get married, or do much of anything without their spiritual leader's guidance and approval. In some instances, church members were told who to marry and where to live.

While I was never a part of the shepherding movement—I was born again several years after the movement ended—it impacted me in some ways.

I remember an incident that set me free in this area. I was considering a decision, and I asked my pastor to pray for me and tell me if he received any instruction from the Lord.

His response? “I will be glad to pray for you, but you can hear from God for yourself.” WOW! Even without specific teaching, I had accepted the false idea that I needed the pastor to get a real word from God. For the first time, I understood I could hear from God. I also realized something else. I was placing the responsibility for my life on my pastor. His gentle rebuke was a revelation to me. It literally changed my understanding of my relationship with God.

Let's go back to our narrative. The discipleship movement did a lot of spiritual damage during this time. All the dangerous practices became standard for many of these 'shepherds.' Excessive control. Top-down leadership. You could not

question a leader. In some cases, you could not even talk to a leader without getting permission first. This exaltation of ministry was killing the Church—at least those caught up in the movement.

The one good thing was that the key people responsible for the movement ended up repenting, and the movement stopped. However, in many cases, the damage was already done. Once again, Christians were wounded and left the Church.

True Biblical discipleship is an important principle that has been lost in the Church today, due perhaps, in some degree, to the excesses of the Shepherding Movement. Sometimes church leaders are afraid to ask too much of church members for fear of pushing them away. On the other side of the fence is the individualism discussed earlier.

Authentic discipleship is never forced or coerced. Discipleship is a consensual relationship between the disciple and the mentor entered into by agreement. Jesus called His disciples with an invitation: *“Come follow Me.”*

Two things are implied in this example. First, the mentor is actively looking for disciples to train. The second is the disciple candidate has the option not to follow. Jesus did not force anyone. In fact, on a couple of occasions, he dissuaded people who wanted to follow Him as a disciple. Jesus is an excellent example to follow for a pattern of the discipleship relationship.

There is one last thing. Authentic discipleship is not taught in a classroom. Jesus did not ask his disciples to attend a meeting or class—or watch a video series. He invited them to walk with Him as he fulfilled His ministry. They spent a lot of time together. He taught them as a group and dealt with them

individually at times. He modeled life in the Spirit, then sent them out to minister themselves. Discipleship is a relationship. It is life in a community. At some point the disciple is released.

The key to this section is discovered in the word excessive. As this chapter's title indicates, these messages, although containing elements of truth, went too far and slid into error. They did significant damage to the Body of Christ. The false doctrines supplanted necessary spiritual and Biblical truth, creating an unhealthy and unbalanced version of the good news. They became "*another gospel*" Paul warned the Galatians about (Galatians 1:6-10).

In some cases, the teachers kept going, pushing further and further into the error to keep followers on the hook. In other cases, the followers put ministers on a pedestal and made it hard for them to be normal.

In this chapter I have attempted to laid out a safety net. We must balance Biblical doctrines with the rest of the Bible. Messages that appeal mainly to the flesh should be suspect. Even when God does bless us in the physical or material realm, there are spiritual implications in it. Nearly every miracle reported in the Bible had a more profound spiritual truth attached to it within the story's context.

CHAPTER 12

THE ERROR OF UNIVERSALISM AND THE HYPER-GRACE MESSAGE

The doctrine of Universalism has been around since the second century AD. In a nutshell, Universalism teaches that all men will ultimately be saved. Some who believe in Universalism deny what the Bible teaches about hell and eternal punishment. They believe that the sacrifice of Christ on the cross was applied to all of humanity for all time.

Others who hold to the doctrine believe in hell but teach that whatever punishment is determined by God will end. The soul will ultimately find its eternal home in heaven. This is more in line with the Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory. To them, judgment is restorative, not punitive.

Closely associated with Universalism is the doctrine of Ultimate Reconciliation. This doctrine teaches that even Satan and his demons will be saved in the end because of the overwhelming power of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

These are tremendous thoughts—if indeed they are true. The problem is the Bible does not teach these things. The Bible is clear that some will be lost. (Matthew 7:21-23; The Revelation 21:8). It is also clear that “*hell was prepared for the devil and his angels*” (Matthew 25:41).

While Universalism has always had its adherents, the twenty-

first century has seen this doctrine experience a significant rebirth.

It is often called Hyper-grace today. While Hyper-grace has its roots in Universalism, many current proponents do not have as much theological background as the early adherents. A lack of solid Biblical understanding fuels modern Universalism in many cases.

Jesus warned of a deception that would be widespread in the last days. He said that if it were possible even the genuine, committed Christians could be deceived (Matthew 24:24). This statement from Jesus gives us a clue that this deception must look a lot like Biblical truth.

Satan has always used—and twisted—the Word of God to deceive and tempt mankind. The strategy was successful in the garden of Eden. He even tried it with Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11). We are told the devil is an angel of light. His demons transform themselves into false “*ministers of righteousness.*” Paul warned us of “*seducing spirits and doctrines of demons*” (1 Timothy 4:1 KJV).

Universalism has several seductive elements. First, it is hard for a Christian to over-emphasize the magnitude of what happened at the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the most significant event in the universe. So powerful was it that people—dead for centuries—arose from their graves and walked around Jerusalem (Matthew 27:52-53). Efforts to bring balance with the rest of Scripture could be seen as an attempt to minimize the power of that experience.

Likewise, those who promote Universalism point to the surpassing love of God. Once again, it is hard to balance God’s love with His righteousness without seeming to undermine or

minimize the love of God. These folks would say, ‘How could a loving God condemn someone to hell, to pop and sizzle throughout all eternity? I certainly love my children more than that.’

It is very appealing to men to do away with sin and punishment. Universalism does this nicely. But is it scriptural? Does it balance the scriptures, or does it ignore a large portion of Scripture that is contrary?

That is where some extremely poor theology enters the picture. Many (not all) modern-day, Hyper-grace preachers do not have a decent Biblical understanding. They get their theology, not from solid, personal Bible study, but the pop speakers of the day. These preachers are a mix of secular and liberal thinkers that question the validity of the Bible. I hear some of these teachers say stuff, and I wonder if they have ever actually read the Bible for themselves.

The seduction of Hyper-grace/Universalism is that it appears to exalt the grace of God, while doing away with the issues of sin, repentance, holy living, judgment, and eternal punishment.

One man told me that God chose His love over His righteousness. I asked him if that meant there was something wrong with righteousness, and therefore fundamentally wrong with God? He did not have an answer.

God is not bipolar. He does not bounce between burning, righteous indignation and burning, holy love. I feel sorry for the people who live with a false understanding of God. Many see God as a hard-to-please father looking for an excuse to judge them. To these people, God’s wrath is only a breath away, and only the constant intercession of the loving Son keeps that wrath at bay—barely.

Last week I saw a Facebook message that illustrates this ridiculous theology. The post was titled *This happened in heaven last night*.

The Father looked at what was happening on earth and burned in His righteous indignation. He wanted to pour out His wrath and judgment on the earth. But—according to the message—Jesus stands up and reminds God that He died for them and that they should be loved. That appeased the Father, so He did not pour out His wrath.

There are so many things wrong with this story. First, to say something happened in heaven that did not is a lie. Second, it makes the Father the mean God and Jesus the good God. Did we forget Jesus is God? Jesus and the Father do not have different plans and different feelings.

This type of theology is very flawed and unbiblical. I immediately wrote back and corrected this view. (Go ahead and call me a troll. It is okay; I am not too fond of deceptive doctrine. Many people on Facebook do not have enough Biblical foundation to see it for the lie it is and simply accept it as truth.)

The other extreme is a loving Father who would do anything for His children—except correct them. These believers would say that God only wants to bless us and would never do anything (that we deem) negative in our lives.

Often people bounce from one extreme to the other without understanding that there is a third, Biblical option.

Universalism did not have much support until the late 1700s, when the first Universalist Church was formed. It gained

prominence through the 1800s as the *Age of Reason*⁸ developed, impacting Europe and America. During this period in history, it was popular to question the Bible. Limited scientific understanding, human logic, and secular reasoning were exalted in place of Biblical teachings.

Atheism also gained a significant following during this time. It is also significant to note that Joseph Smith founded Mormonism in 1830. Charles Darwin was convinced of his theory of evolution in 1839 and published His book Origin of the Species in 1859. Within this thirty-year period, Charles Tazz Russel had founded the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mary Eddy Baker started the Christian Science Movement.

The seeds of spiritual deception we see today were planted and nurtured in the 1800s. By the early 1900s those seeds were producing fruit. The social struggle concerning religion and modern thinking resulted in the famous *Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925*. This was a trumped-up legal battle to gain public awareness for teaching evolution in public schools.

Hyper-grace offers some doctrinal variation among those who believe in it. Like most doctrines, there is not a one-size-fits-all doctrinal statement. The common belief across the board is that Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection ultimately saved everyone.

Some believe that no repentance is necessary because Jesus

⁸ "The Age of Reason refers to a period in history when countries such as France and England took a critical thinking approach to life. Occurring in the eighteenth century, this intellectual movement questioned things such as religion, philosophy, social life, and other things to determine what was logical and what was not. This age is generally regarded as the beginning of modern philosophy and the end of a medieval approach to life."

(<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-was-the-age-of-reason.html>)

died for everyone, so everyone is automatically saved—regardless of what they believe or do.

Another popular doctrine today minimizes or does away with sin. This group would tell you, ‘Jesus forgave you, so it doesn’t matter what you do from now on. You can live any way you want because of the blanket forgiveness purchased at the cross.’

I have always wanted to poke someone in the eye who says that. And then keep doing it over and over. You soon discover this philosophy does not work. At some point, they are going to say, stop it!

Far from blanket forgiveness, Jesus practiced the opposite. One day the religious leaders brought a woman to Jesus who had been caught in the act of adultery. It was a setup to find an excuse to trick, condemn, and dismiss Him. “Stone her,” the law of Moses said. They asked Jesus if He thought she should be stoned. This love and forgiveness stuff He was preaching was going to get Him in trouble. Of course, we find Jesus giving the famous reply, “*He that is without sin cast the first stone.*”

Many Christians quote this verse as a means of stopping judgment. ‘You should not throw stones because you are sinful too,’ they would say. True enough, but the story does not stop there. When all the accusers left, Jesus turns to the woman and says, “I don’t condemn you, go and sin no more.”

Far from blanket forgiveness, Jesus required repentance and change because of forgiveness. Jesus’s forgiveness that day did not grant her a license to keep committing adultery or any other sin for that matter. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

There is something I do not understand about blanket-

forgiveness theology. If a person needed forgiveness in the first place, doesn't it mean what they are doing was wrong to start with? Wrong is wrong, before or after forgiveness.

In effect, Hyper-grace does not justify sinners—it justifies sin. Sinners are not cleansed and forgiven; sin is ignored. That is not scriptural.

Scriptures for Universalism

To give a fair voice to these doctrines, I wanted to list the verses hyper-grace preachers use to justify their ideology. Key verses used to promote Universalism/Hyper-grace include:

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 1 Corinthians 15:22

The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:9

For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time. 1 Timothy 2:3–6

And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world. 1 John 2:2

For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. 1 Timothy 4:10

For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that

he may have mercy on them all. Romans 11:32

These verses all focus on the seemingly universal aspect of God's grace. However, the scriptural balance to the doctrine of Universalism is found in one of their own scriptures: 1 Timothy 4:10. Notice the dual reference Paul makes. Jesus is the Savior of *all* people, but *especially those who believe*. How should this verse be interpreted? I think it is amazingly simple and consistent with the rest of Scripture.

Jesus is the Savior of all men. The fact is, there is no other name given under heaven by which man can be saved (Acts 4:12). If anyone is to be saved, it is through Jesus alone. Paul then qualifies that statement with "*especially those who believe*." While Jesus is the only Savior for all humanity, He is *especially* the Savior of those who believe. Those who do not believe (the condition of salvation) do not avail themselves of Christ's power to save.

The same reasoning should apply to all the other scriptures. God is not willing that any should perish. Universalists would say that God's will is always done, so all will be saved. However, it is extremely illogical to think that God's will is always accomplished with sinful man. Many chose to ignore God's will every day.

Jesus gave Himself a ransom for all. This means every person is included in that ransom price. It does not mean every person will avail himself of the opportunity to be saved through faith in Christ. Consider Romans 5:17,

For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.

Notice it says those that *receive*.

This thought agrees with what John said:

He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name. John 1:11-12

Clearly, some will not receive Jesus. Those who do are granted the right to become God's children. This passage also speaks to another critical belief found in Universalism. Many people believe in the universal concept of the *Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man*, which means that every person is automatically a child of God by physical birth. Since we are God's children, God would not let anything bad happen to us—much less cause it to happen. After all, a good parent would not purposely cause undue pain in a child.

Is this universal *Fatherhood of God* a Biblical concept? It is not. We have already discovered John tells us we must be given the right to become children of God (spiritually). Jesus also addressed the situation with the religious leaders who were attacking Him.

They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "if you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill Me . . . You do the deeds of your father." Then they said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father—God." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do.

He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him....”

John 8:39-44

The Jewish leaders claimed they were the children of Abraham, and thus God—like the Universalists today. Jesus corrected their false understanding. He went so far to as to say they were the children of the devil. Why would Jesus say this? The Jewish people were the heirs of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. If anyone were children of God, the Israelites would be. Yet God does not see it that way.

There are two issues here. First, God said He disregarded the Jewish people concerning the Old Covenant because they did not keep their end of the covenant. He promised to make a New Covenant with Israel, Judah, and the Gentiles. In making a New Covenant, He annulled the Old Covenant. The Jews can no longer relate to God under the Old Covenant.⁹ (Read all of Hebrews chapter eight and nine to see this point.)

While the nation of Israel was, and always will be, God’s people, there is a New Covenant they must enter into by faith in Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah.

Second, as mentioned above, John said Jesus came to His own, and many did not receive Him. He goes on to say that only those who did receive Him were granted the right to *become* the children of God. In a similar sense, Paul uses the term adoption to explain our relationship with our heavenly Father.

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons

⁹ The Old Covenant required the blood of animal sacrifices, the mediation of the Aaronic priesthood, and the temple rituals to be in effect. Since there is no temple, no priesthood and therefore no blood offerings, the Old Covenant is no longer in effect for anyone

of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. Romans 8:14-17

Notice the requirement—or perhaps I should say proof—of sonship: being led by the Spirit. It is a far stretch to say that all the wicked, ungodly, self-seeking people throughout history meet this condition. Now, consider this verse:

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, “Abba, Father!” Galatians 4:4-6

We need to understand three things here. First, those under the law needed redeeming. The law could not do it. Second, those under the law did not have sonship but required adoption. And third, those who are saved and adopted have a witness of the Spirit within them. Again, multitudes do not have this witness.

An adoption is an act of the parents. The child cannot adopt himself to a family. The family—in this case, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—must initiate the adoption. To make the reality of adoption complete, the child needs to adapt to the new family.

Conclusions

To sum up the matter, we can say that the Bible does not teach the key doctrines of Universalism or Hyper-grace, as it has

been called.

The Bible does not teach universal forgiveness. It teaches that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive and cleanse us. (You will note John uses the word IF five times in 1 John 1:6-10). Forgiveness must be asked for and received through faith in Christ.

The Bible does not teach that everyone is automatically a child of God. Instead, it repeatedly teaches that we must become a child of God through faith in Christ.

The Bible does not teach that there is no penalty for sin. It consistently teaches that Christians will stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10), and the lost will stand before the Great White throne Judgment (The Book of the Revelation 20:11).

CHAPTER 13

THE ERROR OF GNOSTICISM

The Gnostic philosophy began before Christ but dramatically influenced the early Church as Gentiles flowed into the Church. Without a Bible and a tried-and-true orthodox doctrinal statement (at least in the fundamentals as we have today), there were many different ideas about the nature of things in the early Church.

As mentioned earlier, *Gnosticism* comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means “to know.” Gnostics believed salvation came through secret knowledge—which, of course, was entrusted to them and only them. In other words, you had to be a member of their group exclusively to be saved. Sound familiar? The Gnostic movement was active in the first century of the Church and reached its peak in the second century before disappearing as a major belief system.

It is making a comeback today as a few Gnostic Gospels have been found and reprinted. The Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, among others, paint quite a different picture of Jesus.

In the Gnostic tradition, Judas becomes the hero for betraying Jesus because he was the only one who truly understood that Jesus had to die. Other Gnostic teaching has Jesus marrying Mary Magdalene and having children with her. After Jesus’ death, Mary becomes the leader of the newly founded Church.

One Gnostic book claims to have stories of Jesus as a boy. In one case He made a bird of clay and called it to life. In another, he withered the arm of a boy who offended him.

It should be obvious that the Jesus of the Bible is different from the Jesus proclaimed in the Gnostic gospels. Paul warns us to be careful about receiving “another Jesus.” He calls it deception, and He is concerned that the Galatian Christians would make room for it. Do the phrases “another Jesus” and “different gospel” refer to the Gnostic traditions being preached in the early Church? It seems obvious they are.

But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it! 2 Corinthians 11:3-4

It is easy to see where the Gnostics deviated from authentic Christian doctrine.

They held to dualism that stated all physical matter is bad, and all spiritual things are good. Therefore, Jesus could not have a physical body. In Gnostic tradition, Jesus only appeared to have a physical form. Of course, there are serious concerns here. If Jesus did not have a physical body, then He could not have been born of the virgin Mary. He could not have had the physical blood required for the sacrifice. Therefore, He could not have died and been resurrected. The fundamental understanding of scripture and the doctrines of Christianity are called into question.

They believed secret knowledge had a spiritual value that would ultimately set a person free from the physical realm to

enter the spiritual realm. Elements of this are present in some modern religions such as Buddhism and other eastern religions.

In the west, Gnostic beliefs flavor the New Age Movement and secret societies like the Freemasons and Shriners. The Masons have various degrees or levels of initiation members go through. Each degree is based on secret knowledge that is only imparted after the member takes a death oath not to reveal the knowledge to the uninitiated. Sound familiar? Masons claim their secret knowledge originated with King Solomon, who built the first temple. Once a man becomes a Master Mason, he is eligible to become a Shriner.

Gnostics believed that all spiritual truth came through them. Some Christians denominations also teach their doctrine or organization is the only true way. There is no salvation outside of their group. Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others are examples of this deception. While Christianity teaches there is no salvation outside of faith in Jesus, it does not limit it to one sect within orthodox Christian belief.

Gnostics taught that God is unknowable. They believed in a hierarchy of Gods with the highest God being remote and unknowable. The God that we know as Jehovah, who created the universe, was a lesser God.

Gnostics do not believe the world was created perfect and became corrupted through Adam's original sin.

Gnostics believe the snake was not evil and opened the door to the secret, hidden knowledge that God did not want Adam and Eve to know. This secret knowledge was the basis of their own truth.

Today Neo-Gnostics claim the Catholic Church destroyed the Gnostic gospels because they wanted to control what people

believed. However, it is easy to see that Gnostic belief is not only incompatible with the rest of the New Testament but is contrary to it. The two do not mix.

New Testament writers continuously battling two early heresies impacting the young Church: Jewish legalism and pagan Gnosticism. John seems most disposed to combat Gnosticism in His writings. Most scholars believe John wrote later in the first century, penning the Book of the Revelation as late as AD 95. If he did write later in the century, he would have been perfectly positioned to correct the Gnostic errors influencing early Christianity.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:1 & 14

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life— the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us— that which we have seen and heard we declare to you.... 1 John 1:1-3

It appears John goes out of his way to address the Gnostic doctrines impacting the first-century Church. He gives his own sworn testimony to the flesh and blood, physical nature of the man Jesus Christ. He says he touched him and heard Him speak.

Additionally, Jesus himself confirmed the fact that he had a

physical body—even after the resurrection.

Now as they said these things, Jesus Himself stood in the midst of them, and said to them, “Peace to you.” But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit. And He said to them, “Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.” When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. But while they still did not believe for joy, and marveled, He said to them, “Have you any food here?” So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. And He took it and ate in their presence. Luke 24:36-43

It is illogical to think that if Jesus was just a spiritual manifestation before His resurrection, as Gnostics claimed, that He would take on a physical body after the resurrection.

Gnosticism lost momentum after the books of the Bible came into regular use. Before that, opinions often prevailed without a reliable, authoritative reference to guide Christianity.

Most Christians would not go for Gnostic teaching today; however, there are some elements of Gnosticism that still influence the Church.

Dualism is still prominent. The belief that there is a separation between the divine things and the world. The physical world is somehow unimportant, and only spiritual things matter. That often manifests itself in fundamental circles that downplay taking care of the earth and its resources.

Some teach that the soul (mind, will, and emotions) are not as important as the spirit. These groups will refuse to

acknowledge sound psychological principles and even refuse to accept higher education as a means of human growth and achievement. I know of at least one Christian denomination that will not allow its pastors to go to Bible College. They think a Biblical education will somehow corrupt the purity of listening to the Spirit of God.

The truth is, God told Adam to take responsibility for the earth. That mandate has never changed.

Likewise, education—both secular and spiritual—is a good thing, if the student remains grounded in the Word of God. I readily admit is difficult for Christian students not to be influenced by the secular humanism taught in colleges. That is no excuse to avoid education. We are to be salt and light in the world.

A dualistic philosophy in Christianity tends to draw a firm line between secular and divine. Going to Church is spiritual. Going to work or school is secular. However, we are Christians twenty-four hours a day everyday. As Christians, our entire lives are lived out in devotion and service to God every day and in every way. The Spirit of God does not just show up on Sundays. He abides with us every hour of every day. He goes where we go. Because of this, there are no truly secular activities. We bring the divine to the world—at work, at school, in the marketplace—everywhere we go.

True Christianity refutes dualism and causes us to realize we are the priesthood of God to the world. We are told we are in the world, but not of the world. Jesus prayed that God would not take us out of the world but keep safe us while we are in the world (John 17:14-18). We are sent into the world with the same commission God sent Jesus with (John 20:21).

As mentioned in an earlier section, exclusive groups and

secret knowledge are always a dead give-a-away to cults and false expressions of Christianity. Paul warns us that knowledge puffs up—or inflates the ego—but love brings edification (I Corinthians 8:1). The word translated *puff up* means to inflate or blow up. The Amplified Bible explains the word this way “to bear themselves loftily and be proud.”

While most Christians would not be considered true Gnostics, the flesh tends to exalt itself with knowledge. Individuals, ministers, and churches who think they are superior because they have some revelation (Biblical or otherwise) are spiritually wrong. These people tend to minimize or even reject others who do not believe their unique revelation or doctrine. This exclusiveness is a root that is grounded in Gnosticism.

As Paul said, love edifies. Suppose God does give you some revelation to share with others. You should not get into the sinful position of pride. We are told that pride precedes destruction, and a haughty spirit leads to a spiritual fall (Proverbs 16:18). Additionally, pride was the original sin of Satan (Ezekiel 28:11-19). Remember, God used a donkey to talk to a prophet once.

While Gnosticism is not a significant doctrinal movement anymore, traces of Gnosticism are still influencing Christians today. There can be “doctrines of demons” impacting individuals and small groups. Exclusiveness, combined with hidden doctrine, are probably telltale signs of spiritual deception.

CHAPTER 14

WORLD WAR 2, FAKE PLANES, AND THE ENIGMA

In World War 2, both the Germans and the Allies used deception to trick the enemy. They went so far as creating entire fake airfields and compounds with life-sized wooden planes, tanks, vehicles, and buildings. The goal was obvious, trick the enemy into wasting time, effort, and resources on useless endeavors. Meanwhile, the real attack was happening on a different front. A misdirection is a useful tool for both magicians and military strategists.

A funny story came out of those efforts at deception. The Germans built a fake airfield in Holland. Of course, it took a while to make the base from scratch, giving the British ample time to observe what was happening. Soon after the construction ended, allied pilots bombed the fake base—with fake wooden bombs. They wrote catchy sayings on the bombs, like “wood for wood,” to make fun of the German efforts, letting them know the ruse was known from the beginning. I tell this story because the Church of Jesus Christ must get its *military intelligence* right. We cannot afford to be fooled by the enemy.

Many military operations have been either very successful or have failed miserably because of military intelligence. Military intelligence is the knowledge of what the enemy is doing or planning on doing so you can be ready. Another story from World War 2 illustrates the importance of this information.

The Germans had succeeded in creating an encryption machine called the Enigma. The device looked like a

typewriter. The codes for the Enigma changed daily and only worked with the correct set of rotors inside the machine itself. Only with a current codebook could the right decoding sequence be entered daily. German submarines, ships, and land forces all carried Enigmas to decode encrypted operational orders. The Allies simply could not figure out what the German's were doing.

However, the allies captured an Enigma machine and codebook from a German submarine without the Germans knowing. British decoders finally figured out the complex decoding systems, and England could decipher Germany's plans and strategies.

At one point, Germany was going to bomb London. The British intercepted the message and decoded it. The British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, could have alerted London that the air raid was coming but chose not to. It had been decided that if London were warned, the Germans would know the Enigma was compromised and would change everything again.

The military intelligence they were receiving by understanding Germany's plans was just too valuable. Ultimately that knowledge would end the war sooner, saving even more lives. Such is the value of knowing what the enemy is doing.

We have a similar story in the Bible. 2 Kings Chapter 6 provides the details. The king of Syria was waging war against Israel. Every plan the king made failed. The king finally confronted his royal advisors. There had to be a traitor in their midst. The king of Israel knew everything the Syrian King planned. Advisors explained to the king a prophet in Israel told the king of Israel what the Syrian king said in his bedroom. The Syrian king learned the location of the prophet

Elisha and sent an army to capture him. They surrounded the town under cover of darkness.

When the morning came, Elisha's servant saw the Syrian army surrounding the town and cried out in fear. Elisha was not the least bit concerned. He told the young man that there was more with them than with the Syrian army. The servant must have looked at Elisha like he had two heads. His eyes were not blind, he could see the enemy army, but the Israeli army was nowhere to be seen.

Elisha simply asked God to open the eyes of the young man to see what he had already seen. When He did, the servant saw a multitude of angels and flaming chariots surrounding the Syrian army. That is an Old Testament example of discerning of spirits.

Elisha prayed again that the army would be blinded. He then led the confused army to Samaria. He instructed the King of Israel to feed them and sent them home, effectively ending the war with Syria. When you place this story into the context of supernatural spiritual gifts, it is easy to see how the warfare ended. The king of Syria could never win as long as a prophet in Israel was listening to God.

We can glean a few interesting spiritual principles from this story. The first one is that the Church needs spiritual, military intelligence. The second is that God is willing and able to give it through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Since God knows everything, He knows what Satan's strategies are. Perhaps God is just waiting for people to ask Him what He knows, instead of blundering through the Christian life by personal goals, emotion, and guesswork.

James instructs us to ask God for wisdom when we do not know what to do and, if we ask in faith, it will be given.

According to James, we need to ask.

This “asking” applies not only to personal direction but also for direction as we minister to others and corporately as we seek the guidance of God for congregations and movements.

Another truth is that those in tune with God see things other people do not see, as was Elisha’s case. His servant was terrified and confused. He had no clue what to do. Elisha was not ruffled. Having insight from God caused him to be at peace. The angels and chariots of fire were there all along, but the servant had no discernment to see into the spiritual realm. Elisha prayed for him to receive that discernment and his spiritual eyes were opened. I wonder how quickly his fear and confusion evaporated when he saw what Elisha saw?

Does this impact you and me in our everyday lives? What is going on around us in the Spiritual realm? The Bible indicates that each of us has angels sent to minister to and for us (Hebrews 1:13-14). As we have seen earlier, the devil and his angels come as ministers of light.

Daniel’s twenty-one days of prayer and fasting is another example (Daniel 10). The angel was sent on the first day but was hindered by spiritual battle in the heavenlies. Unbeknownst to Daniel, his prayer was having an effect in the spiritual realms, even though it appeared nothing was happening in the physical realm in which Daniel lived. The truth is things are always happening in the spiritual realm around us; we just do not usually see into that realm.

Is it possible to increase our ability to see into the spiritual realm? Yes, through faith, by exercising the gifts of the Holy Spirit, developing spiritual discernment, and asking for wisdom consistently.

We need to look at how the Holy Spirit gives us military

intelligence in the spiritual battles we face.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 12, we find a discourse on the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

They can be placed into three categories. The revelatory gifts: These are the principal gifts for military intelligence. The Holy Spirit gives information we could not know in the natural realm. These gifts include the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, and discerning of spirits.

It is not wisdom and knowledge in general. You do not get this knowledge from study or this wisdom from experience. Nor is it referring to emotional spirits such as *team spirit* or the *spirit of enthusiasm*.

These are specific gifts for a particular time. They are pieces of information you could not get any other way except through the Holy Spirit. Through the word of knowledge, the Holy Spirit gives you information about a person or situation. Wisdom is knowing what to do with what you know. Through the word of wisdom, God provides instruction on how to act on what you know. Through the discerning of spirits, the Holy Spirit tells you what type of spirit you are dealing with (review Four Kinds of Spirits in chapter five).

There are three speaking gifts: the gift of tongues (languages), interpretation of tongues, and prophecy. These gifts are not powered by the flesh. These are Spirit-inspired and empowered utterances for spiritual growth and warfare. Paul told young pastor Timothy to wage a good warfare based on the prophecies that were spoken over him (1 Timothy 1:18, 4:14). There has been much confusion and controversy over the gifts of tongues and prophecy. There does not need to be. The use of these gifts is clearly explained and encouraged in the Bible (especially 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14). They are

a vital part of congregational life and spiritual warfare.

Finally, we have the power gifts. These are not exactly military intelligence; rather, they are offensive weapons that take the battle to the devil. They are gifts of healings, faith, and miracles.

Note that the gifts of healings are plural. The gifts of healings are different from general healing. A gift of healing is often instantaneous—or nearly instantaneous. On the other hand, Jesus promised those who believe would lay hands on the sick, and they would recover (Mark 16:18). There is a difference between recovery and instantaneous healing.

We can all pray for the sick and expect them to recover. Jesus did not say everyone would be instantly healed. Many people assume their prayers for healing were not answered because of a false expectation. They think it must all be an immediate manifestation of healing. That only serves to generate doubt and unbelief.

The gift of faith is imparted by the Holy Spirit. Faith moves the hand of God. Faith is how you and I cooperate with God in the work of the Kingdom. At times, when God wants to do something significant, He imparts supernatural faith to a person. This type of faith is a gift. Sometimes it is hard to discern our faith from the gift of faith. It is often manifest in what seems to be impossible situations.

Finally, miracles take the battle out of the natural realm and into the supernatural realm. God is a supernatural God. Jesus said His followers would do greater works than He did. The Church, and individual Christians should expect to see miracles. Since much spiritual warfare occurs in the spiritual (supernatural) realm, we should not expect to be limited to natural tools, strategies, and weapons. If we are not

experiencing God's supernatural manifestation, we need to examine what we really believe.

Honestly, miracles and healings were originally intended as evangelistic tools. When Jesus commissioned and sent his disciples out, He gave them power over demons, the ability to work miracles and to heal people.

Just before He ascended to heaven, Jesus told the disciples, "*These signs shall follow them that believe.*" We are told they went everywhere preaching the gospel and that the Lord worked with them, confirming their word by performing signs and wonders (Mark 16:20). We expect God to work in the Church among believers. However, we find God intended spiritual gifts to be used outside the Church also. He designed them to be manifest among the heathen to validate, what was to them, the totally unreasonable message being preached.

Spiritual battles require spiritual weapons. You cannot fight spiritual wars with the same weapons that work in the natural world. The good news is, we do not have to.

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled. 2 Corinthians 10:3-6

Paul makes my point perfectly. Or perhaps I borrowed that thought from Paul. Even though we live in this world, we do not fight spiritual battles according to the world. Elsewhere Paul reminds us that we do not fight flesh and blood (people) but principalities and powers (demonic spirits) in the

heavenly regions. People are not usually our problem. We must deal with the demonic forces behind people first.

Paul tells us our weapons are not carnal. Carnal simply means fleshly or of the natural body. To win spiritual battles, we must resist using the same tactics we use in fighting people.

Paul says that these spiritual weapons can pull down strongholds or fortified defensive positions created by the enemy. These strongholds are translated as *arguments* in the New King James Version and *imagination*s in the original King James Version. Either way, they indicate reasoning and thought. The truth is that many spiritual battles are fought in the mind and emotional realm.

As we have discovered, lies and deception are key tactics of Satan. If the devil can get you to believe something, you will act on it—or perhaps not act at all if that is his goal. These lies take place in your mind.

In the natural, strongholds were military positions that were easily defended. An enemy might find a high position such as a cave, then move rocks into place to narrow the access to it, making it hard for their enemy to get to them. They would have a significant advantage because the enemy would be hindered by having to walk single file to get to the stronghold. The enemy could then be killed one by one.

Another word picture would be a log jam on a river. One log gets turned sideways, and others come along swiftly to jam up the entire flow of God's Spirit in a person's life. The weapons of God pull down these strongholds and break up the logjam of lies that keep people in bondage. As Jesus promised, the truth will set you free.

You also need to understand the nature and intent of these strongholds. They exalt themselves against the knowledge of

God. That is, they fight against what the Bible says is true about God.

The Bible says God loves you. Satan will find a way to point out that God does not love you. God is good. The devil will show you fifteen scriptures that seem to indicate God is bad. We hear it all the time, “if God is good, why is there war and poverty and injustice.” That is the echoed voice of demonic strongholds. I could give many more examples, but I think you get the point.

The conclusion of the matter is that we are to bring all these thoughts into captivity. We must grab on to them and bring them before Christ, like a policeman apprehending a criminal. Every lie must be replaced by the truth from God’s Word. If the devil says God does not love you, find ten verses that say He does. Quote them until they produce faith in you. Jesus used the Word of God to refute Satan’s attacks. You should too.

It is safe to repeat myself. Much spiritual warfare occurs in our head. That is the place to start winning the battle against lies and deception.

The two main subjects of this chapter are military intelligence and spiritual weapons. What are the spiritual weapons God has given to us?

The main one is the blood of Jesus. The Bible relates thirteen things the blood of Jesus explicitly does for us.¹⁰ When Satan attacks in any of these 13 areas, we have a weapon he cannot resist.

The second weapon in our spiritual arsenal is the name of Jesus. Jesus has given us His name to appropriate what we

¹⁰ See appendix 1 at the end of the book.

need from heaven. We also have authority in the spiritual realm through His name.

In John chapter 15, Jesus explains the process of bearing spiritual fruit. He illustrated this by using a grapevine. His point was that we bear fruit. We are pruned to bear more fruit. We abide in Him to bear much fruit. It is in this context of bearing fruit for the Kingdom that Jesus makes a tremendous promise. Whatever you ask in my name, the Father will give you. The promise was connected to fruit-bearing. It was not a blanket promise obligating God to answer any prayer with the name of Jesus tacked onto it. We do have a guarantee of God providing anything we need to bear fruit for the Kingdom of God.

The name of Jesus also carries authority. That authority is granted to believers to do the work assigned to them in the Kingdom of God. We pray in Jesus's name. Cast out demons in His name. We preach His name for salvation and baptize in His name. The demonic realm must ultimately submit to the name of Jesus.

Finally, in the end, every knee will bow, and every tongue confesses that Jesus is Lord. Even those who have steadfastly resisted and rebelled will have no option but to submit. Faith in the name of Jesus, directed at demonic foes, will no doubt defeat the enemy in the end—even if we must fight battles along the way.

The third weapon is the Word of God. Satan cannot defeat the Word of God. As already mentioned, Jesus simply quoted the Word of God to Satan each time he was attacked. We will not win spiritual battles without the Word of God, which is why there is such an all-out war on the authenticity and authority of the Bible today. A Bible without power and authority is like a gun without bullets; all you can do is beat someone with it.

To these main weapons, we can add others Paul mentions. It is outside the scope of this book to spend too much space elaborating on them in detail. Still, they are significant and need to be mentioned in the context of the current discussion. Like the ones above, I will provide a few *seed thoughts* to spark your self-study.

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints— and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak. Ephesians 6:10-20

Paul illustrates our spiritual weapons using the picture of a Roman soldier. He then applies these items to our spiritual struggle. There are several things to take note of in this passage.

Our strength is not in our ability, education, cleverness, or power. Our strength is in the Lord. As the story of David illustrates, a teenager with a slingshot took out an experienced soldier—a nine-foot tall one. Your size, position, or rank, physical or spiritual, does not matter. Your power and authority are in Jesus, not in yourself. Satan wants to make you think you are not enough. You are enough through faith and obedience.

As I mentioned before, we are not fighting people but demonic foes. Make sure you are fighting the right battles. Demonic powers and the deception of the enemy are critical thoughts in Paul's instructions. Do not get distracted from the real war.

The word *stand* is used four times in the lead-up to the list of spiritual weapons. Standing is a valid spiritual tactic. Do not be moved. Do not give up the ground you already have. The spiritual armor Paul describes is designed to help you stand against every demonic attack.

The first piece of armor is the truth. You do not win spiritual battles with lies or manipulation. I have often seen Christians post things on the Internet that are false. When confronted, they will say, "well, it doesn't make any difference; the other guys are still wrong." The truth is it does matter. God cannot lie, and He does not use lies to build His Kingdom or make His points. Our agenda may be right but lies and manipulation never are. Stay in the truth if you want to be effective.

Next Paul instructs the Ephesian believers to have their feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. The Bible admonishes us to be ready in season and out of season (2 Timothy 4:2). We are also advised to be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks for the reason we have hope. (1

Peter 3:15).

You will never share the gospel if you do not plan to. Being prepared means thinking ahead about what you might say or what scriptures you can share and explain. The definitive part of preparation is “prep.” It involves forethought. It means to make a plan. Memorize some scriptures. Carry some gospel tracts.

Prepare your personal testimony, so you are ready to share what God has done in your life when the opportunity arises. Your testimony is important. You are not trying to win someone to your doctrinal point of view but to your living Savior. People can argue with your doctrine, but they cannot argue with your testimony. They either believe it or call you a liar. There just is not any room for debate when you tell people what you have seen God do personally.

Resist the urge to tell someone else’s story; tell your own. If God has not done something in your life worth telling others about, you need to take a serious look at your Christian experience.

The shield of faith is next on the list. A shield fends off the enemy’s attack, be it an arrow, spear, or club.

Too often, Christians spend their time pulling out the devil’s arrows and healing from spiritual wounds. How much better it would be if we stopped the flaming arrows before they hit us. The shield of faith protects us from demonic weapons. Faith is appropriating what God has said. Without the Word of God there can be no faith. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God. We do not fight with our words and thoughts but rather with the Word of God in direct opposition to demonic attacks. According to Paul, there is not a single attack that cannot be stopped with the shield of faith.

Next Paul urges us to put on the helmet of salvation. As mentioned before, many battles take place in our minds. The helmet of salvation guards our minds against these attacks. The devil often attacks our identity in Christ, questioning our sonship. He points out our failures and unrighteousness, even though the Bible tells us we have the righteousness of Christ. Defeating the demonic onslaught means winning the battles in our minds first by replacing lies with truth.

Then Paul comes back to the Word of God. It is both a defensive weapon (shield) and an offensive weapon (sword). So often, it seems the Church is on the defensive, always resisting attack. The early Church was on the offensive, taking people and territory away from the devil. Today, the Church needs to start taking the battle to the devil again.

We should note that the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God.

There are a couple of essential thoughts here. The first is that it is the sword of the SPIRIT. It is the Holy Spirit that wields the sword through us. It is not our sword; it is His sword. Second, it is the Word of God. Putting these thoughts together gives us the key.

The Holy Spirit gives us the right scripture, at the right time, to effectively defeat the demonic attacks. There is a cooperative effort indicated here. We must depend on the Holy Spirit to speak to us, and we must be able to hear and obey in faith.

Finally—although this principle often gets left out of teaching on the spiritual armor—we need to experience effective prayer. We are admonished to offer prayer and supplication with perseverance. That means that we do not get tired and quit before the battle is won.

You will notice there is no butt-plate. Nothing here covers your back. A good soldier does not run from the fight, he faces the enemy. Facing that direction, he has protection. That is something to keep in mind.

Soldiers go through training before being sent to the battlefield. Soldiers must learn to use their weapons and develop their strengths and abilities. The more experience and training they get, the better soldier they become.

Perhaps one reason Christians seem to lose—or avoid spiritual warfare altogether—is because they have never been trained. They do not have much experience in using the spiritual weapons and gifts of the Spirit provided for them. That is the fault of church leaders who either do not know how to do battle themselves or are afraid to empower their congregations for fear of losing control. The Church of Jesus Christ must start training believers to walk in the Spirit of God instead of just attending Church and being a good member.

Another military analogy is significant here. Soldiers were rarely sent out alone. They usually go out in teams. Jesus sent His disciples out in teams of two. There are several reasons for this, but the main one is that team members have different specialties. These teams needed members with demolition experience, communication specialists, weapons specialists, and medics. Such is the Body of Christ and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives each person a mix of gifts. We need others on our team who have the gifts we do not, and they need us as well.

Soldiers must also learn to take orders through the chain of command. As King, Jesus is the commander in chief of His spiritual army. The Old Testament uses the term Lord of Hosts, which indicates a military title in Hebrew. The

Message Bible provides an accurate translation, “God of Angel Armies.” Different versions translate this term with various phrases. However, the Hebrew thought behind “Lord of Hosts” is used 261 times in the Bible.

God gives marching orders to His people through the Holy Spirit. These often come in the form of the Spiritual gifts we discussed above.

The Church is described in many ways. Two important word pictures are as a community and a body. Both terms indicate more than one person. While we must learn to listen to the Holy Spirit individually, we must acknowledge we are vitally connected to others through that same Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:12-14). God does ordain leaders. The Church is told to respect and follow its leaders. On the other hand, prophecy and tongues often come through others in the congregation. We need to learn to humble ourselves and submit to the direction of God through the Spirit of God, no matter who it comes through.

We are not lone soldiers; we are part of the army of God.

CHAPTER 15

THE GOOD NEWS

I believe the greatest harvest of souls is just ahead of us. We are told multitudes will be saved out of the great tribulation. This present age is winding down. The final spiritual confrontation will come to a head. We will see everything we have discussed in this book manifest—both the demonic warfare and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—to a greater degree. It is easy at times to concentrate on the negative, the dramatic, and the sensational. That is human nature and one of the reasons our end-time doctrines are so messed up.

The twentieth century witnessed two world wars. Communism not only impacted geopolitical regions but brought the world to the edge of nuclear war. The year 2020 was unprecedented in many ways. The Corona virus affected world economies and altered business and organizational models. The United States served as a launchpad for social revolution that has brought significant changes in American culture. Most of those changes were not for the better regarding the Church. Without being dramatic, it is safe to say the world will never be the same after 2020.

Soon things will happen that have never happened before. To meet these exciting and challenging times, God is preparing His Church in new ways, for new things.

I do not believe God sent the Corona virus. I do think God used it, as He has always used the devil's schemes to His own

advantage. (Remember the cross?) Changes forced on the Church in 2020 will serve to restructure and retool it for the days ahead. Some will try to get back to Church as usual as soon as possible. I do not think that is God's intent. The Church must transform. We must put new wine in new wineskins (Matthew 9:17). The current model of doing church will not be sustainable in the next five to ten years—if Jesus carries that long.

Instead of looking for the devil to have his heyday, we need to believe what the Bible tells us.

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, Thanksgiving and honor and power and might, Be to our God forever and ever. Amen." Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?" And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me, "these are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living

fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” The Book of the Revelation 7:9-17

Notice it does not say saved *from* great tribulation but have *come out of* THE great tribulation. Many modern commentaries suggest this just means Christianity throughout the ages. That tribulation is just the normal experience of all Christians. Jesus did say, in the world, you will have tribulation. However, three things would indicate it is yet future. The definite article *the* points to something specific. The adjective *great* also indicates a specific period. It is not merely tribulation but rather “the great tribulation.” Finally, there is the context. John is seeing what is happening in heaven during a future time. These things point to a great harvest of souls in the days ahead, both before and during a time of great tribulation.

A problem for many Christians is the way they have been taught about The Book of The Revelation.

The first five words of the book are, “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” Somehow that gets twisted in the theology of many to *the revelation of the devil*.

Christians spend more time talking about the antichrist, the beast, 666, and how Christians are going to be killed than they do about Jesus Christ.

The Book of the Revelation reveals Christ and God’s final plans for redemption. According to Jesus’s own words, He came to seek and save the lost. John tells us He was manifested to destroy the works of the wicked one. Is there a better way to reveal Christ than through the salvation of souls? Even in the middle of the worst spiritual battle of the cosmos? Satan can rage, but he cannot win.

More Christians get their end-time doctrine from the Left

Behind series of novels than they do from the Bible. Many Christians are simply waiting to get out of here before things get too bad. The Left Behind series is fiction. The Bible is true. Many seem to forget Jesus's prayer in John chapter 17, which, in part, says, "*I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one*" (John 17:15).

Consider another scripture that is not the topic of many sermons.

Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and on the cloud sat One like the Son of Man, having on His head a golden crown, and in His hand a sharp sickle. And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, "Thrust in Your sickle and reap, for the time has come for You to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." So He who sat on the cloud thrust in His sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped. The Book of the Revelation 14:14-16

Once again, it points to a future harvest. Israel had three harvest seasons, associated with their three annual festival seasons. The first harvest was the barley harvest, and it was associate with Passover, First Fruits, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. These correspond to salvation. The second harvest was the wheat harvest three months later. This feast was associated with Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The final harvest season was the greatest harvest of the year. It was the fall harvest of corn, wine, and all the other fruits and vegetables. This harvest was associated with the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. There is no question the last harvest was the greatest.

Yes, the Bible indicates there will be a time of tribulation and

that there will be an all-out spiritual war. God knew this and told us about it. It does not mean the Church has to run and hide. The darker the darkness gets, the brighter the light shines. The book of Daniel, which seems to parallel The Book of the Revelation in places, has something to say about this.

Those who do wickedly against the covenant he shall corrupt with flattery; but the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits. And those of the people who understand shall instruct many; yet for many days they shall fall by sword and flame, by captivity and plundering. Now when they fall, they shall be aided with a little help; but many shall join with them by intrigue. And some of those of understanding shall fall, to refine them, purify them, and make them white, until the time of the end; because it is still for the appointed time.
Daniel 11:35

Every war has its heroes. During the intense spiritual battle ahead, some will be strong and do exploits. They are the heroes of the faith. That was not limited to a few select people with some special calling. It was a prophetic word for anyone who *“knows their God.”* That can include you and me. It is not an exclusive club for super saints. It is a step above Christianity as usual. It does require commitment, faith, obedience, and no doubt, sacrifices. Perhaps the most significant requirement is desire. Do you desire to be strong and do exploits in the days ahead? Are you willing to pay a price for it?

I will repeat myself without apology. The greatest spiritual harvest and most exciting spiritual times since the first-century Church are just ahead of us. Greater things will be asked of us. I understand this. The stakes will be much higher. However, it is time for many in the Church to leave the locker

room (sanctuary) and get on the playing field. Jesus said something significant that we need to act on:

Do you not say, “There are still four months and then comes the harvest” Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! John 4:35

The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. Matthew 9:37

These and other passages point out a few facts. The world is always ripe for harvesting. Souls can always be saved. We cannot say it is not time to evangelize. We do not need to wait for a different season. Another fact is evident; there are not enough people working in the harvest. The entire Church is commissioned to serve in the harvest field. Relatively few do so. There is no special calling to be a harvest worker. While there are different gifts given to different people, anyone can and should lead others to Christ.

A careful reading of the three passages that speak of spiritual gifts (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4) will reveal that at least one—if not several—spiritual gifts are given to each believer. A Christian cannot say they are not called or that they are unequipped to work in the spiritual harvest fields. That does not mean everyone is going to be a foreign missionary. Your mission field may be across the street. Genuine believers need to stop making excuses for their lack of service. Unfortunately, the western Church of the 21st century has trained them differently. To many, the epitome of good Christianity is to come to church, put money in the offering, believe what they are told, and try to be somewhat moral.

The instruction to “Test the Spirits” covers a lot of ground essential for the survival of the Church of Jesus Christ in the last days. I have often said, God will have a Church that demonstrates the nature, power, and glory of God in the last days. That has never been the question. The question is, “will you and I be a part of it?”

The true Church of Jesus Christ has existed since the night of the resurrection, when Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Ghost.” It will continue to exist throughout eternity. However, we must acknowledge that there is an all-out war being waged against her. We cannot afford to take that war lightly. We must also make sure we are fighting the right battles and not being infiltrated and sabotaged by the enemy.

The one-two punch of this book is simple. Learn to discern the true from the false and get in the battle.

I hope and pray that you will test the spirits so as not to be deceived in these critical days. I desire that you walk in the Spirit and experience the gifts of the Spirit. I want you to experience the power of God in and through your life as you commit to a fresh Biblical expression of the Body of Christ.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Steve Highlander and His wife, Brooke, are currently living in Papua New Guinea, where they serve as missionaries with the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. The Highlanders teach in several Bible colleges, and travel the country speaking in regional and provincial leadership conferences. They focus on discipleship, mentoring, and leadership development. Steve regularly speaks in local churches, revivals, and crusades.

Steve has a doctorate in Pastoral Theology combined with over thirty-five years of ministry experience, including pastoring four churches in the Midwest. In 2009 he and a team of two other elders planted Christ's Church, a non-traditional church in Nevada, MO.

He founded Door of Hope Prison Ministry, and with His team, conducted over 450 services inside the walls of Norton Correctional Facility, a Kansas State Prison. He has also led hundreds of Bible studies in county jails.

Steve has worked on the mission field in Mexico, several countries in West Africa, and the Philippines, in addition to his current work in Papua New Guinea.

His background in publishing and multi-media communications has lent itself well to Kingdom purposes. Steve created the Real News Review, a monthly Christian Newspaper published out of Springfield, Missouri, and The Encourager, a digital magazine highlighting Second Reformation themes. Steve also produced and spoke on two radio programs covering twenty-five thousand square miles in NW Kansas, SW Nebraska, and Eastern Colorado.

In 2004 He created TalktoaPastor.com, a website dedicated to answering questions from anyone about anything. Over the years, thousands of people have written in to find the spiritual answers they were seeking.

In 2021 he launched a new website for third-world pastors, leaders, and workers. EmmausRoadInstitute.org is a free service offering ministry resources, continuing education, and mentoring options for ministers who have little access to these things.

As a couple, the Highlanders also have years of experience working with at-risk youth, both professionally and in the ministry. Steve was the chaplain of ShowMe Challenge, a boot camp program for at-risk youth sponsored by the Missouri National Guard.

Brooke has a master's degree in Applied Psychology and a doctorate in Christian Counseling. She teaches Pastoral

Counseling and Time Management. She is a popular speaker on topics such as Gender-Based Violence, Overcoming Fear, and A Renewed Mind. She has developed and taught seminars on peer counseling and psychological first aid.

Steve and Brooke are both Certified Christian Counselors. Brooke and Steve have five children and 15 grandchildren, and an ever-growing number of great-grandchildren.

When they are not in Papua New Guinea, they live in Independence, Missouri, USA.



APPENDIX 1

THIRTEEN THINGS THE BLOOD OF JESUS DOES FOR US

Remission: Matthew 26:28 - For this is my blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.
Definition: Remission / forgiveness / deliverance / liberty / divorce / neglect / disregard

Purchased: Acts 20:28 - Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

Propitiation through faith: Romans 3:25 - Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;

Justified: Romans 5:9 - Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.

Redemption/Forgiveness: Ephesians 1:7 - In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace;

Brought near: Ephesians 2:13 - But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.

Peace: Colossians 1:20 - And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

Purge our Conscience: Hebrews 9:14 - How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Take Away Sins: Hebrews 10:4 - For it is not possible that the

blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.

Access to God's Presence: Hebrews 10:19 - Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus,

Sanctification: Hebrews 13:12 - Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. *Def: To separate from the profane and dedicate to God*

Cleansing: 1 John 1:7 - But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

Washed: Revelation 1:5 - And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood.

All scriptures quoted from the Authorized King James Version of the Bible.