

From Saul to Paul

From Bondage to Freedom

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Who is weak, and I not weak? Who is offended and I grieve not? If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities. . . . And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

(II Corinthians 11:29-30, 12:7-9)

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Addenda

Out of the pit

And Saul was consenting in his [Stephen's] death. (Acts 8:1)

How did Saul come to grips with having been an accessory to capital murder? It wasn't easy. It was more than just a blot on his resume. The way back meant acknowledging his abject neediness. Down through history echoes his agonizing cry:

Oh wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7:24)

What was Paul so wretched about? Sin, to be sure but most of us have experienced pangs of regret for failures of one kind or another, only in Paul's case these pangs were especially acute, bordering on self-loathing. From this he needed deliverance.

Toward the close of his ministry, Paul confessed that he had been "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious" (I Timothy 1:13), "the chief of sinners" (I Tim. 1:15), "unworthy of being called an apostle" because he had "persecuted the community of God" (I Corinthians 15:9). His regrets were lifelong; they never ceased.

Even in his pre-conversion days, for all his strenuous efforts to serve God, Saul might just have harbored a nagging suspicion that all was *not* well with his soul. If only on an unconscious level, he knew he had fallen short. Perhaps, in the astringency of religious zeal, he judged himself harshly and, judging himself harshly, he judged others harshly as well, and, from such cause as this, there arose in him the urge to persecute.

Saul's problem, not unlike that of many other over-earnest youths, was his hoping to get on God's good side through zealous performance but, in setting about to establish his own righteousness, he missed out entirely on God's righteousness.

As a fierce defender of the old order, whose boast was exterior legal observance, Saul believed in a coercive hierarchy's right to compel obedience. Thus he may have taken it as a personal affront, when he heard Stephen say to his detractors:

Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit. (Acts 7:51)

Sectarian boundary setting relies heavily on dogma to determine who is submitted to authority and who is not. For that reason alone, Saul would have seen as inherently threatening the freedom Jesus' followers experienced in their inwardly-directed walk with the Spirit, for, instead of being *conformed* to the dictates of a sect – any sect –

they were being *transformed* by the renewing of their minds, which is to say that they exercised a broad latitude to think their own thoughts and be their own persons. As for Paul, in his own words, he tells us what he did to the followers of Jesus:

I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which things I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities. (Acts 26:9-11)

Shrewdly sizing up Saul as one with whom they could do business, the Temple authorities commissioned him to commit additional atrocities, for that is how it is with hierarchy men, they willingly take every impulse, be it high or low, and bend it to their own ends, and all the while they would have us suppose that they do service to God:

As for Saul, he made havoc of the community, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. (Acts 8:3)

Now was the time for getting out of Dodge, for a madman had been set loose on the streets of Jerusalem. Philip headed north, to Samaria; others fled to Syria.

And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2)

The upward path

This is where the story gets really interesting because, before Saul could carry out further acts of terror and mayhem, he had his “Damascus road” experience:

Whereupon as I [Paul] went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday . . . I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks? And I said, who art thou Lord? And he said I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. (Acts 26:12-15)

Nothing quite equals having an encounter with the living Lord to prepare one for making a radical career change. Again, let us hear directly from Paul:

And I said, What shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said unto me,

Arise, and go into Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all things which are appointed for thee to do.

And when I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of them that were with me, I came into Damascus. And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there, came unto me, and stood, and said unto me,

Brother Saul, receive thy sight.

And the same hour I looked up upon him. And he said,

The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth. For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard. And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord. (Acts 22:10-16)

Once the scales had fallen from Paul's eyes, with his vision restored (for he had been blinded by the glory of our risen Lord), he was a new man. Instead of spinning his wheels, making life miserable for himself and injurious to others, he did a complete 180° turnaround, going from despicable persecutor to noble freedom fighter. After all, what is conversion but to turn around, to look upon a love profound?

Where religion had warped Saul, reducing him to a sub-human level; spiritual revival restored him, giving him a positive eye- and ear-witness message to relate:

And straightaway he [Paul] preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. (Acts 9:20)

Naturally, none of this sat too well with the Jewish Establishment:

And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took council to kill him: but their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him. (Acts 9:23-24)

In order that Paul might make good his escape, the Lord's disciples lowered him in a basket out a window in Damascus's city wall. He had entered Damascus blind and he left in a basket but he also left as a baptized believer, ready to make amends.

Paul's greatest victory was not that of seeing through the false claims of the religious

“ G o s p e l ” d e f i n e d

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. (*Isaiah 9:2*)

DARKNESS AT NOON

As if existing under a dark cloud, the Holy Land in Jesus' day was a place where illness was chronic, where poverty was endemic, where injustice reigned supreme. It was a place where the folk, like sheep without a shepherd, were herded about, harried by ravenous wolves, namely, their leaders. Such was captive Israel's sorry plight, its synagogues dominated by Pharisees, its Temple by Sadducees, while a pagan king sat upon the throne. Their problems went beyond the usual political, financial or religious ones. Spiritual oppression – even demonic possession – ran rampant throughout the land. 2000 years had elapsed since God had covenanted with Abraham. Was that it? Was this as good as it gets?

A NEW DAY DAWNING

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! (*Isaiah 52:7*)

It all began with a voice in the wilderness, that being John's, saying:

I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness,
Make straight the way of the Lord,
as said the prophet Isaiah. (John 1:23)

Then came the religious folk called Pharisees, for to be baptized by him. And Saint John told them that they should seek repentance, and that they should not put their trust in their kinship connection with those who sometime past were well pleasing to God: for God might make good men of those also who have no such hope before them. And God would not delay having each man done by him according as he deserved. And then asked these folk what they should do, and how might they be saved. And John answered them that they should give alms to the poor for the love of God.

(*NAZARENE GOSPEL NARRATIVE, chapter 7*)

Uniquely it was Israel's mission to receive God's Anointed One, the Messiah. To

establishment, though that he did; rather, his greatest victory was over self. Instead of being confident in himself, he moved his trust to God. On seeing the impossibility of pleasing God in his own right, he submitted to the cross of Christ, that being the stake of impalement. Humbled, he accepted God's pardon:

... but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. (I Timothy 1:13)

Paul's life as a Christian didn't begin until his life as a flunky for the Establishment had ended. Having gone to Damascus as the hunter, he left as one of the hunted. Taking Paul's belt and binding his hands and feet with it, the prophet Agabus said:

So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. (Acts 21:11)

Not one destined to die in bed, Paul was hounded by the authorities all the days of his life, then martyred. It all turned out just as Jesus said it would:

I [Jesus] will shew him [Paul] how great things he must suffer for my name's sake. (Acts 9:16)

Beaten, whipped, stoned, exposed to the elements, you name it, Paul suffered it, then he kept on coming back for more:

Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the summoned-out communities. (II Corinthians 11:25-28)

Whatever happened to Paul? Did he switch sides or change dimensions? I think the best explanation is that Paul put himself under obedience to the Gospel, beginning with his being baptized but not stopping there, for he continued on, just as he said:

For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him:

If we suffer, we shall also reign with him:

if we deny him, he also will deny us:

If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful:

he cannot deny himself. (II Timothy 2:11-13)

that end Jesus was born in Bethlehem. But all did not go according to plan. While the common folk heard him gladly, the leadership did not, which is why of a necessity Jesus lived his first 30 years in obscurity, albeit he was in plain view. On being revealed to the nation by John, Jesus said:

... the kingdom of God is at hand, repent ye, and believe the gospel. (Mark 1:15)

As one who was fulfilling the signs required of the Messiah, Jesus said:

... the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear,
the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached. (Luke 7:22)

Never mind about all of that. It made not a wit of difference to the powers-that-be what Jesus said or did. All they cared about was their prerogatives, which Jesus seemed to be endangering. If Jesus spoke as no man had ever before spoken or if he performed miracles galore or fulfilled every messianic sign in the Book, so what? They cynically accused him of doing so by the power of Beelzebub.

Jesus responded by accusing them of committing the unpardonable sin, namely, that of blaspheming the Holy Spirit, after which Jesus was on the religious mafia's permanent hit list. Finally, setting his face toward Jerusalem, Jesus perfected his redeeming work on a stake of impalement. Then up from the grave he arose.

Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith Jehovah of hosts. (Zechariah 4:6)

Presenting himself as Israel's rightful King, Jesus appointed twelve men to rule Israel's twelve tribes but instead of being crowned king, he was crucified, his bona fide offer rejected. However, all of that having been foreseen, Jesus said in advance:

If I be lifted up from the earth, will draw *all* men unto me. (John 12:32)

A comprehensive message, the Good News that Jesus proclaimed makes provision for both the here and the hereafter: the Kingdom within and the Kingdom to come. The one, as Paul put it, is: "Christ in us, the hope of glory;" the other is the Millennial reign, at which time Jesus returns in power to rule the world from Jerusalem.

Jesus affirmed God's character, that God is Light, that in Him is no darkness whatsoever. He further affirmed that God is a loving father. As for Paul, he affirmed that God has established one mediator between God and man, the man, Christ Jesus. If Christ be not risen, then we are of all men, most miserable, Paul said – but he has.

MOREOVER, BRETHREN, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.

FOR I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: and that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve:

AFTER THAT, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles.

And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

BUT by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. (1 Corinthians 15:1-10)

The Great Commission

To his apostles, Jesus said:

Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. (*Mark 16:15*)

Being sent, they went, and this with a will and with a passion, for, having been empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they had the fortitude necessary to accomplish the task at hand, that of proclaiming Jesus and the resurrection. But where lay the limits to their commission? What limits dare we place on the word “all”?

As chief apostle, Peter thought he knew where lay the limits on Gospel presentation, that it did not include Gentiles, but he was in for a surprise. In a vision from God, Peter was instructed not to call unclean that which God called clean. And while Peter was pondering this and yet doubted the vision’s meaning, there came a knock on his door. Three men representing a certain Roman officer were there requesting his presence in Caesarea. And immediately God’s Spirit spoke to Peter, saying:

Arise therefore, and get thee down, and go with them, doubting nothing: for I have sent them.

The next day in Caesarea, at the home of Cornelius, Peter found there gathered an assembly ready to receive him. Addressing them, he said:

Ye know how it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company or come unto one of another nation; but God hath showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

Peter could say this because the day before, his preconceptions about Gentiles had been upended by a direct revelation, making clear the contrast between God’s royal law of universal regard and man’s propensity for narrow-minded boundary setting.

In reply to Peter’s accommodating statement, Cornelius said: “Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God.”

Then Peter opened his mouth and said, “I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.”

Without attempting to recap the entire account (it runs for 48 verses), in essence, this was Peter’s *eureka!* moment, the instant when on meeting a righteous Gentile it dawned on him that the mountain of faith can be climbed from many directions.

For Peter, sharing the Gospel didn't just mean changing another person's mind but also changing his own. But then we make of Scripture what we will, which is why it's often not so much what we believe as how we construe it that counts. Others before and since Peter have had such insights. Even so, his was a bright, shining moment when religion took a holiday from parochial sectarianism.

Note: the righteous Gentile in question, Cornelius, was neither Jewish nor Christian but a God-fearing pagan who, as such, couldn't have distinguished Jesus from Adam, yet, at the time of visitation, he had God's approval. But on what basis? obviously not on the basis of his having "saving faith" in Jesus (for how can one believe who hasn't heard?) Rather, it was on the basis of personal integrity, from which issued forth faithful deeds, even as it is written:

... an angel of God coming in to him, and saying unto him, "Cornelius." And when he looked on him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said unto him, "Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God." (*Acts 10:3-4*)

As was the case above with Peter and Cornelius, so also with Jesus' Nazarene followers generally, instead of trying to be controlling, they approached the world with full hearts and open arms and, to a surprising degree, found their openness reciprocated, such that by 1st century's end, the Gospel had spread across the globe from the British Isles to India and to many points in between.

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN

In *Acts* (ch. 8, vs. 26-40) a story is told with few extra trimmings about an unnamed Ethiopian, a higher-up in the court of Ethiopia's Queen, who, as the story unfolds, was wending his way home from Jerusalem, when, on the road to Gaza, his path converged with that of a man named Philip.

Philip, too, had recently departed Jerusalem but, instead of going south to Gaza, he went north to Samaria. Nor did he leave freely, of his own volition; rather, as we have before seen, under threat of death from a youthful zealot, named Saul.

After receiving a resounding welcome among the Samaritans, where the Gospel was gladly received, on the Spirit's prompting, Philip suddenly departed Samaria, flying there as it says, and landing in the desert area north of Gaza. There he espied the aforementioned Ethiopian traveling by chariot.

Approaching him, Philip saw that he was reading the Scriptures and inquired of him:

"Understandest thou what thou readest?"

Said the Ethiopian:

"How can I, except some one shall guide me?"

He wasn't comprehending and was honest enough to admit it. The Ethiopian's problem was not so much his having a dearth of information as having too much. Having just come from Jerusalem, his ears were full of grasshoppers, no doubt from contact with learned Temple scholars whose guidance proved to be little more than *mis-guidance*. Despite a long pilgrimage, the Ethiopian was returning home, his questions unanswered. The book he was studying when his and Philip's paths crossed was that of *Isaiah*, that portion of it which reads:

He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer,
so opened he not his mouth: in his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and
who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth.

The Ethiopian inquired of Philip:

"Of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?"

That was all the lead-in Philip needed. The Ethiopian had the Scriptures but not the key that opens them. For his part, Philip had the key, that being the life and teachings of our Lord which make plain what until then had been a mystery. Without our knowing all the details, it's safe to say that their conversation had been a wide-ranging one because the Ethiopian eventually asked Philip:

"See here is water; what doeth hinder me to be baptized?"

Evidently nothing hindered for, in reply to his question, Philip said:

"If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest."

Affirmed the Ethiopian:

"I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

Just like that, it was a done deal. Not deputized by some higher religious authority, Philip proceeded of his own volition, guided by the Spirit's prompting. No creed, no catechism, no period of investigation was required of the Ethiopian, just faith. Neith-

er time or place were at issue; any body of water would do. Such were the ways of the Nazarenes: their ordinances were simple, their teachings public, their standard for fellowship: heartfelt allegiance to God alone.

And they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.

Afterward, the Ethiopian went his way rejoicing. And why not? His name hadn't been put on a mailing list, nor was he inducted into a tithe-collecting church, nor did he even have to climb, climb up sunshine mountain where heavenly breezes blow. He was home free and free to go home, unencumbered by all the imaginary obligations cooked up by a hierarchical institution.

The revival that occurred was no flash-in-the-pan excitement whipped up by a trained orator. Not emotionalism, but a straightforward presentation of Scripture is what did the trick. As reported in the *Book of Acts*, the Samaritans "received the Word of God" and "were baptized into the name of Jesus." That Philip was able to reach his audience so quickly with his message reflected well on him; and, also, it reflected well on them.

Though they lived by humble trades, Philip and his colleagues were able to articulate a coherent message, one of neighborliness and right-doing to the glory of God. Philip's boldness came from the Spirit, that we know, but from whence came his learn- edness in the Word? Ultimately it came from Jesus himself who taught his disciples "the first principles in the oracles of God." Said Paul of the Nazarenes' way if life:

We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succored thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.) Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed: but in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, in fastings; by pureness, by knowledge, by long suffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.

(II Corinthians 6:1-10)

The Nazarene legacy

*The Church and the World walked far apart
on the changing shores of time.
Said the World to the Church
"your dress is too simple to please my taste;
I will give you pearls to wear,
rich velvets and silks for your graceful form,
and diamonds to deck your hair."*

So begins a quaint poem familiar to many evangelical Christians. Actually, it is code language alluding to Rome's embrace of the Church in 325 AD at which time Constantine made Christianity the Empire's state religion. That is when Protestantism dates the wholesale falling away from primitive virtue.

Without gainsaying that particular moment's importance as a historical turning point, I would note the existence of at an earlier one - almost 200 years earlier – whose greater significance has somehow been forgotten, namely, Jerusalem's destruction by Hadrian in 135 AD, after which the Church assumed the Nazarene's legacy.

While it's practically axiomatic for most Christians that the Church is God's approved instrument for perpetuating the Gospel, that assumption needs to be tempered by the knowledge that this same institution lost or even deep-sixed many valuable texts.

I do not think the central figure of Christianity or its central doctrine will be obscured by a careful restoration of the broken and almost lost fabric of its earliest literature. (J. Rendel Harris)

Remarkable what can slip down a memory hole into a lake of collective forgetting. For instance, how many among us know that George Washington was not the US's 1st President but its 8th or that John Hanson was its 1st? or that it wasn't the *US Constitution* for which insurgents fought and died, rather, *The Articles of Confederation*? Patriots were baited to fight on the promise of sovereign statehood yet, once the fighting was done, their States were subsumed into a consolidation. And if this can happen in modern times in our own land, yet without our generally being aware of it – as well, it can happen in the distant past, in a faraway land, again without our generally being aware of it. No way can Nazarene history be squared with the Church's.

THE NAZARENES IN PROPHECY

1. And a great sign was seen in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and
2. upon her head a crown of twelve stars. And she was with child, and cried out in her travail and pain to be
3. delivered. And there was seen another sign in heaven; and behold, a great red dragon, having seven heads and
4. ten horns, and upon his head seven diadems. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman that was ready to be delivered, that he might
5. devour her child when she was delivered. And she was delivered of a son, a man child, who shall break all the nations with a rod of iron: and her child was
6. caught up to God and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that there they should nourish her a thousand two hundred and threescore days.
7. And war burst forth in heaven:
Michael and his angels had to war with the dragon;
And the dragon warred and his angels; and he prevailed not,
8. Neither was their place found any more in heaven.
9. And the great dragon was cast down, that old serpent,
- He that is called the Devil and Satan,
That deceiveth the whole world -
He was cast down to the earth,
And his angels were cast down with him.

- 10.** And I heard a great voice in heaven, saying,
Now is come the salvation, and the power
And the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ:
For the accuser of our brethren is cast down,
Which accuseth them before our God day and night.
- 11.** And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb,
And because of the word of their testimony,
Seeing that they loved not their lives even unto death.
- 12.** Therefore rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them:
Woe unto the earth and the sea!;
For the devil is gone down to you with great wrath,
Knowing that he hath but a short time.
- 13.** And when the dragon saw that he was cast to the
earth, he persecuted the woman that had brought forth
- 14.** the man child. And there was given to the woman the
two wings of the great eagle that she might fly into the
wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a
time, and times, and half a time, because of the serpent.
- 15.** And the serpent cast out of his mouth after the woman
water as a river, that he might cause her to be swept away
- 16.** by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the
earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the river which
- 17.** the dragon cast out of his mouth. And the dragon waxed
wroth with the woman, and went away to make war with
the rest of her seed, which keep the commandments of
God, and hold the testimony of Jesus.

(Revelation ch. 12)

Is Jesus the Israel of God?

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many things." "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all." (Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*)

Those possessing great power over society have a way of defining words their own way, then making their definitions stick. They would direct our attention to a modern-day political entity but the Scriptures directs us to a man.

The word 'Israel' today generally refers to the oversea's political nation, the State of Israel. When people say 'I am going to Israel,' they mean a trip to Tel Aviv or Jerusalem . . . [But] the prayers that Judaism teaches, all use the word 'Israel' to mean 'the holycommunity.' (Rabbi Jacob Neusner)

A higher law than Humpty Dumpty's is the Law of First Mention, whereby a word means that which Holy Writ first says it means. Let us ask in this instance what meant the word "Israel" when first it fell from the lips of the unidentified "man" who had engaged the patriarch Jacob in an all-night wrestling match?

Having held his own, Jacob at daybreak demanded a blessing from this mysterious person. His reply was swift in coming:

"Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but **Israel**: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed." (Genesis 32:28)

A compound word, "Israel" in Hebrew can be divided into three parts: 'ils- "man" ra- "struggle" and "-el," "God." A God wrestler, Jacob, the "man who struggles with God" wrestled God's mysterious representative at night to a draw that by morning he won a blessing. Suggestive of whom he was wrestling, Jacob, now, Israel, named that place of struggle and blessing "Pneiel," *pnei*-, meaning "face of," for, as he put it:

"I have seen God face to face and lived." (Genesis 32:30)

Not long thereafter, Jacob built an altar. In naming the altar, he appropriated his new name, calling that place “*El-elohe-Israel*,” which when translated means: “God is the God of him who struggles with God.”

Now here is where things get just a little complicated for there exists an alternative way of translating “Israel,” one widely recognized in antiquity, involving Breaking the word *Israel* into three parts: ‘*is ra’a el*, meaning the “man who saw God.” (Or: *yasur el*, meaning: [he] sees God.) Recalling, then, what Jacob said:

“I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.” (*Genesis 32:30*)

Wrote Philo of Alexandria (c. 25 BC - 41 AD?) :

For seeing is the lot of the freeborn and first born Israel, which [name], translated, is the one seeing God.

(*On Flight and Finding*)

Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170-c 236 AD) wrote:

“Israel means a “man seeing God,” while others say it is a “man who will see God.” (*Pentateuch*)

Wrote Origen (185-232 AD):

“It is this people alone which it is said to “see God,” for the name Israel when translated has this meaning.”

(*On First Principles*)

Wrote Eusebius (c. 260 - c. 340 AD):

“Israel” means “seeing God,” in the sense of the knowing and contemplative faculty.” (*Praeparatio Evangelica*)

Wrote Augustine of Hippo (354 - 430 AD):

... he [Jacob] then asked for a blessing from the same angel whom he had just overcome. The granting of this new name was thus the blessing. For Israel means “one seeing God,” which in the end will be

the reward of all the saints. (*City of God 16:39*)

Leaving aside the finer points of definition for linguists to settle, it would be reasonable, in our present state of knowledge, to make allowance for both meanings: “to struggle” and also “to see.” And who is to say that a double meaning wasn’t intended from the outset?

Even in our relentlessly secular era the public is broadly acquainted with the particulars of Jacob/Israel's story, for instance, how he obtained his twin brother Esau's birthright by cunningly disguising himself so as to deceive his blind, aged father, Isaac, into granting him Esau's blessing. After that he had to flee to the far country to escape Esau's wrath. There he lived 20 years in Laban's household (Laban being his mother Rebekah's brother).

By agreement with his uncle, Jacob worked seven years for the hand of Laban's daughter, Rachel, and, as the Scriptures read, those years seemed to him "but a few days, for the love he had for her."

However, on his wedding night, Jacob discovered that he had been deceived, that his veiled bride was not Rachel, rather Rachel's unmarried older sister, Leah. Therefore he worked another seven years for Rachel and six more years after that, and still Laban kept diddling him, changing his terms of employment.

Only a few notables, a Moses or a David, are given a fuller, more detailed treatment in Scripture than that which was given Jacob/Israel. Because his experience speaks volumes about the passions and pathos of the human predicament, people from diverse times and places can relate to him.

Even so, in a certain sense he is merely a placeholder. Or to say it another way, he foreshadows the one who really saw God and who really grappled with God, that is the "son of man" whom Daniel saw in the fiery furnace, or whom came to Abraham as Melchizedeks, the Prince of Salem.

So reads *Isaiah 41:8*:

"But thou, Israel, art my servant ... the seed of Abraham."

Expounding on this same verse, the apostle Paul wrote:

Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. The Scripture does not say, 'and to seeds' meaning many people, but, 'and to your seed' meaning one person, who is Christ. (*Galatians 3:16*)

Rightly dividing the word of truth

And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he [Jesus] expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. And he said unto them [his disciples], These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures. (Luke 24:27, 44-45)

In the interval between his resurrection and ascension, Jesus conducted, as it were, a six-week, non-vocational Bible course in which he brought forth from Scripture such matter as pertained to himself. Called *Testimonia*, Matthew recorded them and his Nazarene brothers utilized them in their gospels and in other, supportive literature.

It is helpful to know that there existed from the beginning a stock of authoritative teachings which could account for agreements both verbal and theological as exist in the New Testament, which agreements have puzzled generations of scholars who wondered, was Paul borrowing from Peter? or was Peter borrowing from Paul?

Astonishing is the *Testimonia*'s breadth of conception regarding Christ's nature, as well as, his role in nature. Moving us well beyond prediction and fulfillment, types and anti-types, the *Testimonia* informs us as to the centrality of Christ in the entire scheme of things, from creation to salvation, and much else besides.

... there are still people who believe Jesus never affirmed himself to be the Messiah. It would be nearer the truth to say that he never affirmed himself to be anything else. (J. Rendel Harris)

Out of unbelief, many scholars have postulated that Jesus' own messianic consciousness required a long developmental period; as well, they postulate that it took his disciples a long time to cook up such tall tales as they told. But best scholarship does not require unbelief, for it was Jesus, not Paul, not Peter, not any other, who was the Nazarene movement's great theologian, for it was Jesus who taught his disciples the first principles of the oracles of God. No long period of gestation was required.

An amazing survival from antiquity is found in the Anglican Church's O Antiphons, for broken away from their original moorings are the headings of the Testimony Book which Matthew shared with his co-workers:

1. O Sapientia / O Wisdom.
2. O Adonai / O Lord.
3. O Radix Jesse / O Root of Jesse.
4. O Caudus David / O Key of David.
5. O Oriens splendor / O Radiant dawn.
6. O Rex gentium / O King of the nations.
7. O Emmanuel rex et legifer noster / O God-with-us, Our King and Lawgiver.

Of this J. Rendel Harris wrote:

It appears that in the great O's Christ is defined as Wisdom in the terms of the Sapiential books, . . . They are pro-ethnic to a remarkable degree. Christ is the root of Jesse, who stands for an ensign of the people, the one to whom they appeal. He is the King of the Gentiles, the Desire of the Gentiles, the Expectation of the Gentiles and their Savior. The term "King of the Gentiles" is interesting, it is the correct reading in Apoc. xv. 4. . . Then we notice that Christ is appealed to as the Stone, the Cornerstone, and we have shown abundantly how characteristic such a term is of the early years of Christianity.

It has been observed that the Gospel is nothing other than prophecy fulfilled:

I [Paul] delivered unto you first of all what I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried and that He rose again . . . according to the Scriptures.

(I Corinthians 15: 3-4)

In Ephesians 6:17, in exhorting us to take "the sword of the spirit," Paul used not the Greek word *logos* but *rhema*. While it is generally assumed by modern readers that the "word of God" is the Bible, Paul's meaning is not that; rather, it is prophetic utterance. In wielding the sword of the Spirit, Paul is advising us to make appropriate use of prophecy. An example of his doing so:

Men and brethren, children of the stock of Abraham, and whosoever among you feareth God, to you is the word of this salvation sent. . . . And we declare unto you glad tidings, how that the promise which was made unto the fathers, God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee.

(Acts 13:16, 32-33)

Whether to his own people or to a Gentile king mattered not, Paul still took the same approach, that of reasoning from the Scriptures. As he testified to king Agrippa:

I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should show light unto the people, and to the Gentiles. (Acts 26:22-23)

Following in the footsteps of Jesus and Paul, those who succeeded them, various of the saints of antiquity, continued to develop a high view of Christ-centered interpretation of the Old Testament based on the spirit of prophecy and Holy Writ:

For this was he who was pilot to Noah; Who conducted Abraham; Who was bound with Isaac; Who was in exile with Jacob; Who was the divider of the inheritance with Joshua, the son of Nun. (Meito)

Alas, good news too often was received as bad by those who were resentful of their loss of status as God's only little biddies. Biding their time, the Jews took their revenge.

Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth

What happens when Jesus is no longer the prism through which the Bible is read? Spiritual blindness such as has befallen much of evangelical Protestantism is what happens. It is ironic that much of what passes for "Old Time Religion" dates no earlier than the 19th century, when an arcane hermeneutic, called "dispensational truth," was subtly palmed off by certain conniving Jews as sound doctrine. One of its most pernicious features is that of assigning Law and Grace to different dispensations:

Everywhere the Scriptures present law and grace in sharply contrasted spheres. The mingling of them in much of the current teaching of the day spoils both, for law is robbed of its terror and grace of its freeness. As a dispensation, grace began with the death and resurrection of Jesus. (Cyrus Scofield)

The antithesis of Law is not grace but lawlessness. Law and grace work together to prevent lawlessness. Grace didn't begin with the death of Jesus. There is plenty of grace to be found in the Old Testament, most particularly because Jesus is found throughout the Old Testament. Likewise plenty of law exists in the New Testament. Of course they are co-mingled. Where did this guy get off in thinking they weren't?

In the predictions concerning the future of Israel and the church, the distinction is still more startling.

The church will be taken away from the earth entirely, but restored Israel is yet to have her greatest earthly splendor and power. (Reverend Cyrus Scofield)

This, the warped teaching of a rapture-crazed, doomsday cult, must have come as sweet music in Prime Minister Menachem Begin's ears when he was introduced to it by the Reverend Jerry Falwell. Said Israel's Begin to Falwell, if the Christians would support the Jews today, he would support them tomorrow when the Messiah comes.

That is the tradeoff: Zionist Christians get to entertain their chimerical illusions about a pre-Tribulation rapture, for which not one scintilla of biblical support exists, while Judaic Zionists get to fulfill their nefarious plan to rule the world from Jerusalem.

Boldly embracing a belief in contrasts, the dispensationalist, W. Graham Scroggie, apparently saw little in way of continuity between Testaments, Old and New:

The Old Covenant . . . holds us in bondage, but the New brings us into freedom. The Old involves a curse, but the New imparts a blessing. In the Old man seeks God, but in the New God seeks man. By the Old man is condemned as a sinner, but by the New he is delivered from his sin. In the Old God says 'you cannot', but in the New Christ says 'I can'. The Old Covenant is really bad news, but the New Covenant is Good News, that is, Gospel. . . . How wonderful is the contrast: Moses and Christ; Mosaism and Christianity; Death and Life; on Stone and in the Heart; Letter and Spirit; condemnation and Righteousness; Passing and Permanent; face Veiled and Unveiled; Bondage and Freedom; Transience and Transformation. . . . There are at least ten points of contrast between the Old and the New Dispensations. Christianity is not glorified Judaism; it is something entirely new. There is a fundamental difference between the Law and the Gospel. (W. Graham Scroggie

The unfolding Drama of Redemption, Kregel Publications, 1994 (vol. II, p 74, vol. III, p. 92)

No doubt Scroggie sincerely believed that he was promoting "the faith once delivered to the saints." (Jude 3) but somehow he fell short of his objective by about a century, his doctrine in many ways mirroring that of the famous, 2nd century heretic, Marcion. Unlike Graham, however, Marcion, whose book was appropriately titled: *Antithesis*, carried this idea to its logical conclusion by claiming that there were two Gods: the good God, Jesus, and the bad God, Jehovah. Conversely, Paul testified:

So worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets. (Acts 24:14)

Paul's confession points to his intent, not to betray the Old Testament, but fulfill it.

It is Christ Himself, not the Bible, who is the true word of God. The Bible, read in the right Spirit and with the guidance of good teachers, will bring us to Him. (C.S. Lewis, Letters)

If we knew as Paul and C. S. Lewis did, that Jesus is the meaning behind the meaning of Scripture, we'd find him everywhere; then the systematizers couldn't touch us.

You may remember the story of how the devil and a friend of his were walking down the street, when they saw ahead of them a man stoop down and pick up something from the ground, look at it, and put it away in his pocket. The friend said to the devil, "What did that man pick up?" "He picked up a piece of the truth," said the devil. "That is a very bad business for you, then," said his friend. "Oh, not at all," the devil replied, "I am going to help him organize it." (Jiddu Krishnamurti)

Here's the kicker, according to Dispensationalists, Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom (Mat. 24:14) is to be distinguished from Paul's Gospel of Salvation (Eph. 1:13), as if they weren't the same thing. That is how the antinomian church ends up with easy believism, salvation today and lordship tomorrow. This is pure sophistry. It exists as a way to evade much of what Jesus had to say, especially his sterner admonitions:

Because strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. (Matthew 7:14)

To paraphrase C. K. Chesterton, who spoke along the same lines:

The Gospel was not tried and found wanting; rather, the Gospel was found difficult, therefore not tried.

Jesus died to make men holy, he died to set men free. Physician to the whole man, he came to open the eyes of those born blind, as well, to open darkened minds. Releasing humankind from bondage of every kind, Jesus came to heal both broken hearts and broken bones, even as he affirmed in this his first sermon in Nazareth:

The Spirit of Jehovah is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of Jehovah.

Jesus didn't call us to be the salt of the prayer meeting or light of the church steeple. He called us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Nor was Paul given to hand-folding and stargazing but was intensely interested in performing good works.

The “chosen people” complex

What actually lay behind all the animosity? The doctrine of equality. The Temple authorities were highly dependent on the tithes and offerings coming in from those engaged in loan sharking and slavery throughout the Roman Empire, these being exclusive Jewish franchises. It was all justified on biblical grounds that God wanted Jews to be good to each other but were free to take advantage of Gentiles:

Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury; but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury: . . .

(Deuteronomy 23:20)

Moreover you may buy the children of the strangers who dwell among you, and their families who are with you, which they beget in your land; and they shall become your property. And you may take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them as a possession; they shall be your permanent slaves. But regarding your brethren, the children of Israel, you shall not rule over one another with rigor.

(Deuteronomy 25:45-46)

The only Wall Street bigwig doing hard time these days is Bernie Madoff, a Jew who robbed Jews. The double standard lives on: rob Gentiles blind, not a problem, but don't be robbing any Jews or that's liable to be the end of you. The Scripture verse the Jewish leadership perennially seems unable to locate is this one:

In thee [Abraham] shall all nations [Gentiles] be blessed.

(Galatians 3:8, see Genesis 12:3, 18:18, 22:18, 26:4)

To bless or to blast? that is the question. Jesus' Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have others do unto you, runs up against the Rule of Gold that says: them that have the gold rule. In the fight for the heart and soul of monotheism, no good deed goes unpunished; for advancing the rule of right over might, Jesus was never forgiven.

In announcing that he had come to “preach deliverance to the captives,” did Jesus mean to limit this only to those in spiritual bondage? Was there no social application? Be assured, Jesus was out to change the moral climate to make usury and the trafficking in slaves unacceptable and the Jewish Establishment knew it.

Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. (Leviticus 19:18)

This foundational truth was revealed in Moses' time. All Jesus did was to recognize its primacy as the “second commandment like unto the first.” In his parable com-

mending the good Samaritan, Jesus posed the question: “who is thy neighbor?” and answered it by depicting one of despised ancestry having compassion for a wounded Jewish wayfarer, while a brother Levite crossed over to the other side of the road.

So, in answer to Jesus’ question: who is our neighbor? let us consider if it is not the next person we meet. By encouraging his listeners to see possibilities where before they had only seen impossibilities, Jesus teaches us to reach out to those of other races and religions and social backgrounds, and especially to the disadvantaged. Initially Jesus had gone to his own, that is, to the lost house of Israel, but his own received him not. The problem was not just a few bad actors; the problem was systemic. Every institution of society failed Jesus: the Davidic kingship, the temple priesthood, the synagogue.

Rather than try to reform any of the forgoing institutions, Jesus established as his fallback position the believing individual, the sanctified home, the faithful community, the latter being his little flock, his *ekklesia*. It was a return by Jesus to what Abraham had with God in the beginning, a one-on-one relationship between a man and his Maker. And let us not forget the ladies whom Jesus equally included.

In de-constructing the narrative of power, Jesus de-legitimized the Jewish Tribal Project when he told the chief priests and elders, in these uncompromising words:

The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.

(Matthew 21:43)

Thus did Jesus sweep aside any claim to an exclusive franchise held by the physical descendants of Abraham. This should come as no surprise, for no one people has a monopoly on neighborliness or pious impulses, nor should we suppose that a universal faith would be founded on anything other than universal respect.

I [Jesus] say unto you, that many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 8:11-12)

Such is the East-ness and the West-ness of it all, for that which is truly Israel cannot help but witness to the light within others, notwithstanding divergent traditions.

Summarizing Jesus' doctrine of inclusion, Paul said:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female:
for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs
according to the promise. (Galatians 3:28-29)

Paul was too insightful a person to hang up over a mere symbol, a sign in the flesh.
He was one for seeking out underlying realities, reasoning thus:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision but a new creature.
And as many as walk by this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.
There is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.
(Galatians 6:15-16, Romans 3:30)

The controversy over circumcision was not so much about a small flap of skin in a sensitive place; rather, it was a covenantal sign regulating how Jews and Gentiles relate to each other. Paul's essential insight was that both categories are now grafted into the Abrahamic heritage, not by any ritual act, or by mere physical descent, but by faith. Flinging open wide the doors of acceptance and inclusion, Paul wrote:

Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; that at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: but now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. (Ephesians 2:11-18)

By breaking down the middle wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles, Jesus abolished the hostile us/them, Jew/Gentile paradigm. Whither Leviticus 25:44; whither Deuteronomy 23:20? They are in abeyance. Gentiles are strangers no more.

The promises given Abraham were for all people and for all generations, with Jesus

the guarantor, as well, their fulfillment. Thus, instead of there being a new, replacement Israel, as some suppose the Church to be, there is the same Israel of old, going back to Abraham and to Abraham's grandson, Jacob, whom the angel renamed "Israel." But I use this term in the spiritual sense, recognizing that in different scriptural contexts it could reference to a political entity or to an ethnic group.

Let us recall that the angel that struggled with Jacob through the night until daybreak lent to Jacob his own name, a name which means "prince of God." Some would say that this was Jesus, the Israel of God. However that may be, to the same extent that we are in Christ, and he in us, then to the same extent are we, too, the Israel of God. Those evangelical Christians (which happens to be most of them) who exult the present political entity "the State of Israel," vociferous claim that the Church is not the Israel of God, indeed, can never be, that only Jews can be the Israel of God. In this they're partly right, for they and their churches are not the Israel of God. But neither is the Jews-only State of Israel the Israel of God; rather, it is a murderous imposture.

The "chosen ones" correctly perceived that Jesus and Paul's radical egalitarianism undermines their race-based identity and was a threat to their avaricious way of life, a way of life based on exploitation and war, for if the Jew/Gentile dichotomy is subsumed in Christ, what then of usury, who can the Jews rightfully take advantage of?

Albeit times have changed, international Jewry's agenda has not. By controlling the central banks of the world, it controls the money supply, expanding it, then contracting it at will, until debt slavery ensues. As regards its pet tribal project, the Jews-only State, it is racist to the core and blindly violates any concept of universal rights.

Thinking they follow the apostle Paul, the churches follow instead the pre-conversion Saul, for just as Saul offered himself to fight the Jewish hierarchy's wars, so today the Zionized churches offer up their children to fight the Jews' wars of aggression.

In failing to distinguish the common folk who heard Jesus gladly from the elitists who had him killed, the churches betray their heritage. But why? Out of a mistaken notion that Asiatic, Khazar Jews are God's chosen people. Imagine, a phallic worshipping, Turkish tribe putting on such airs! But this line of thinking is disseminated in all directions. TV and radio promote it. Books, newspapers, Christian seminaries all play into the false narrative, until society is thoroughly saturated with this message. Meanwhile, no one who'd refute this deception is granted the oxygen of publicity.

It is not just by chance that utter, complete clowns in polyester suits have open access to the mass media when reputable scholars do not, for we know who own the organs of mass communication, as well, what their game plan is, that it is to so trivialize and demean the Christian Faith as to make of it a complete laughingstock.

If we are serious students, if we are serious about following God, then we will tune out these siren voices. Instead, of imbibing polluted waters from polluted wells, we will resort to a clean cistern and read the Gospels. We will read Paul.

Meanwhile, if we had any real interest in Abraham's children after the flesh or, if we had any interest in simple justice, then we would be championing the Palestinians' cause.

The 2004 exit poll showed that a whopping 78% of white Evangelicals voted for George Bush and that they comprised 23% of the overall electorate. (Report of the Pew Forum, The Guardian 05-31-06)

I can tell you, from all our polling, no issue so encapsulates an evangelical view of the world than the United States' relationship to Israel. I have had evangelical leaders say that George Bush can do just about everything and not alienate his base, except on the issue of Israel.

(Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life)

It matters not their calling themselves "Evangelical" or "Pentecostal" or saying that they are "born again." If the Zionized churches have made common cause with the Zionist perpetrators of 9-11; if also the US went to war because of them, then, as was the case with Saul, they are accessories to capital crime. The rendering of criminal assistance in waging aggressive war is too serious a matter to let pass. It demands a verdict, for:

What fellowship can light have with darkness? Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will be with you. (II Cor. 6:14, 17)

It is incumbent upon us to distinguish light from darkness. For truth's sake, we need to forsake the way of persecution by withdrawing from the Zionists' circle of war.

The chief corner stone

Even as Paul informs us, we have a sure foundation, Jesus Christ our Lord:

Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, *Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone*; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Defining our terms:

The corner stone of an ancient building served as an alignment stone for the foundation. The Greek work of the original biblical text for corner stone is *akrongoniaios*. this is a compound word containing the work for corner (*gonia*) combined with the prefix word for the extremity or uttermost part of something (*akron*). Literally, it means "lying at the extreme corner," and refers to the crucial stone that was laid in setting the parameters for a foundation. The angle of the cornerstone was precise, and it determined all of the subsequent lines and other angles of the building. It was a standard for the bearing of the beams and walls in the construction of the entire building. (Dan Hayden)

In popular perception, there are churches, or the Church, if you will, an institution. But it was in respect to individuals and communities of individuals that Paul wrote:

Ye are God's building. (I Corinthians 3:9).

Our body, so Paul informs us, (I Corinthians 6:19) "is the temple of the Holy Spirit," the corner stone to which is Jesus Christ. We build our interior chapel as we will:

Nor other foundation can man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. (I Corinthians 3:11)

So who will a hammer be and who a stone? And who will build according to the master carpenters plan? Wood, hay, stubble, precious stones, silver or gold, what materials do we bring to the great visionary building, the body of our Lord?

To Timothy, Paul wrote:

. . . that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the community of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. (I Timothy 3:14-5)

Circumcision as it relates to the oracles of God

What advantage then hath the Jew? Or what profit is there in circumcision? Much every way:
chiefly because that unto them were committed the oracles [*logion*] of God. (Romans 5:1-2)

If, as above, in Paul's view, the chief advantage the Jew has is that God had committed to him His oracles, then we should know more about oracles, what they are:

Testimonies, in the early Christian sense of the word, are, on one side, very nearly equivalent to quotations; but from another point of view, the term involves the idea, of the person testifying as well as the thing witnessed; they are not only extracts from a book, they are the utterances of the person who is the author of the book. Thus the formula "it is written in the law" is impersonal and denotes strictly a quotation, but "Moses in the law saith" is a testimony, and Moses himself is the [oracular] witness.

(J. Rendel Harris, Oberlin lecture)

Defined narrowly, an oracle is oral testimony, an audible witness, but in a larger, spiritual sense, it could be the inaudible voice of God speaking within. In Greek, the word for "word" is *logos*. A related word is *logion*. Whereas *logos* could be speech either human or divine, *logion* is exclusively God communicating to man, whether audibly or whether inwardly, be it by vision or by dream or to the conscience.

The oracles say that God will not hide from a man dear to Him a mystery
that is hidden and secret to many but will reveal it to him. (Eusebius)

EDWARD CARSLUS SELWYN, ORACLES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, 1912

The oracles are precious words, and the words in the New Testament which are precious to the writers are words of the Old Testament. They were precious because they proved the great fact that Jesus was the Christ. The proof is known generally as the Argument from Prophecy.

To pronounce the words Jesus Christ is to assert a coincidence, a coincidence which is by no means accidental but providential, in accordance with the will of God, and inseparable from the belief in that purpose. . . . A coincidence was discovered between the facts of his life and the ideas of the previous faith. Jesus was identified with the Christ, the man was found to correspond with the Opinion, the life to fulfill the Faith.

It would not be too much to say that the final cause of the Old Testament was to be Messianic, to

provide Christian proofs, to be an armory of Christian weapons. But now all these weapons, these proof-texts, are words of a certain kind and purpose, sought out for it and discovered, and stored up for future use. That is to say they are just *Logia*, precious words, oracles, utterances, extracted from the treasury of God.

In the Greek Bible the word *logion* is a favorite with the translator of the 119th Psalm. He uses it eighteen times for the 'precious word of God (five of the eighteen times it is in the plural). In the remaining places it bears just the same meaning, even when the " precious word of the Lord is full of wrath " (Isa. 30:27). But for a translation we must have one word for one word, and " oracle " is the best that we can use, understanding it to be the spoken oracle, not the oracular authority which speaks it.

"The Oracles " in the New Testament. When we come to the New Testament we find the same consistent usage in the four places only four where it occurs. St. Stephen (Acts 7:38) says, "Moses received living oracles to give unto you," and surely the Decalogue, to be the foundation of the sermon on the Mount, was a thing of precious words.

And these were the oracles above all others that St. Paul meant when he said (Rom. 3:2) that the first advantage of the Jews over the Gentiles was "that they were entrusted with the oracles of God" first in time, and first in importance. He also is distinctly thinking of Sinai, for he immediately proceeds, "What if some did disbelieve?"

We then come to Heb. 5:12 , where the Hebrews "have need for one to teach them what are the elements of the beginning of the oracles of God." Here we begin to have the real New Testament sense of the word, for in the two last passages St. Stephen and St. Paul are both speaking of early Old Testament times when the oracles were only in the hands of the children of Israel. But here they are to be in Christian hands, and what for? In order to be used in the manner stated above, for the more confirmation of the faith, by investigation of select passages bearing on the Christ that was to come and had now come.

The Hebrews were mere infants, in need of milk instead of solid food. He urges them to pass on to full growth, yet without anticipating the course of nature. The passage is one of great importance, and brings out the exact meaning of *Logia* very clearly. For immediately afterwards we have a repetition in other words of the same idea. He says, (6:1) "Leaving the argument of the origin of the Messiah, let us move on unto full growth."

"The beginning of the Messiah" can be no other than " the elements (or rudiments) of the beginning

of the oracles of God," or, the alphabet of the oracles of God. Now, although even the alphabet has a beginning, the usual meaning of alphabet is beginning, and therefore we are to equate the origin (of the Messiah) with the alphabet (of the oracles of God).

It follows that the oracles of God are oracles of the Messiah that is to say, they are oracles delivered by God concerning the Messiah, discovered by man rightly in the scriptures of the Old Testament.

What he says, then, amounts to this: "I have now sketched for you the outline of Messianic teaching in the Old Testament on the person of the Son in relation to angels, of Jesus in relation to Moses, and have begun to deal with His priesthood in relation to Melchizedek. But on this I have much to say and what is hard to interpret. I have been dealing with *Logia* throughout, but I am conscious of taxing your dulness; you have in truth never been drilled in the alphabet of *Logia*, in the simplest rules for taking and finding passages of the Old Testament which bear upon Jesus as the Christ. However, I must take you on with me. I must leave the rudimentary *Logia*, assuming your knowledge of them, as I assume your knowledge of the four duties of repentance from dead works and faith in God and baptisms (compared with baptism) and confirmation, and of the two great doctrines of resurrection and judgment. And I must take you to some more advanced *Logia*."

He has given them some thirteen *Logia* and is going to give as many more. The present passage forms a break in the argument which serves at once as a space for rest and for solemn exhortation. The apology for his abstruseness takes the quaint form of an apology for their childish dulness.

The last New Testament passage is I Peter 4:11: "If any man speak, let him speak as speaking oracles of God." For "man" we are justified here in saying "prophet," for he has just before said, "Each as he received a gift"; but the gift may be of substance, in which case they are to minister it to one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God and equally so if it be of spirit, and then if the gift is of spirit, a prophet is to speak as conscious that he speaks oracles of God.

The prophet spoke according to the rules clearly set forth by St. Paul in I Cor. 14:23-33. He spoke *Logia* in combination with other *Logia* or with recent events, his "revelations" were similar in kind, in genus but not in species, to the Revelation of St. John the Divine.

The scriptures are holy, but not all equally "precious" until the need arises: then, and just so far, they are "oracles." The scriptures become *oracles* when they are found to exhibit traces of the great purpose of God to those who seek it.

Obey? Obey not!

Obey them that have the rule over you. *Hebrews 13:17*

From a Catholic, a Jehovah Witness, a Plymouth Brethren, an Adventist, from one of the Church of Christ and also one from the Bible Church, as well by those who are non-denominational (the list is seemingly endless), I have had quoted to me this particular verse of Scripture as it is translated above. Of course, invariably, what they mean is: obey those who are from their own organization – not from any other.

With all due respect, this verse is a weak reed on which to lean because the underlying Greek word translated "obey" is *peitho*, meaning "persuade," not "obey." The proof of this is found in *Hebrews 6:9*, where the *King James Version (KJV)* reads:

... we are persuaded [*peitho*] better things of you. (*Hebrews 6:9*)

Had the author of *Hebrews 13:17* really meant "obey," he would have used the word, *hupakouo*, as he did two chapters before in the sentence:

By faith Abraham when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive as an inheritance, obeyed [*hupakouo*] ... (*Hebrews 11:8*)

And forget this business about "rule over." It's not there either. Neither the word for rule nor the word for over (as is found in the *KJV*) is there but the underlying Greek word is *hegeomai*, the same word as Luke used when he quoted Jesus saying:

He who is greatest (*i.e.* a leader) [*hegeomai*] among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. (*Luke 22:26*)

Jesus' anti-authoritarian imperative shines through in the following verse:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; ... (*Matthew 20: 25-26*)

Once we appreciate, as Paul did (*Romans 12:2*), that Jesus wants God's Spirit doing the *trans*-forming through moral persuasion; not man's organization doing the *con*-forming through coercion, then we are fit to revisit *Hebrews 13:17*, and see that it more authentically reads:

Persuade [and/or] be persuaded by those who provide leadership [*hegeomai*] among you ...

Independent but not aloof

I conferred not with flesh and blood

That was Paul, a self starter, who got his marching orders directly from God:

But I assure you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me
is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it,
but by revelation of Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:11-12)

Paul could be, and often times was, a team player. But he was perfectly capable at all times of making his own decisions and taking responsibility for his own actions.

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother.

Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also. And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain. But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: and that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: to whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you. But of these who seemed to be somewhat, (whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me: God accepteth no man's person:) for they who seemed to be somewhat in conference added nothing to me: but contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter; (for he that wrought effectually in Peter to the apostleship of the circumcision, the same was mighty in me toward the Gentiles:) and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision. (Galatians 1:15-19, 2:1-9)

A generous orthodoxy

I cannot be the only reader who has wondered why God, having given him [Paul] so many gifts, withheld from him (what would to us seem so necessary for the first Christian theologian) that of lucidity and orderly exposition. (C. S. Lewis)

For sure, as Peter observed, there are things hard to understand in Paul's writings but then Paul may not have been so much the theologian as he was mystic, whose writings are demonstrations of the Spirit. Some of his writings are high poetry:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

(I Corinthians 13)

As we contemplate how different in personality Paul was from James, or Peter from John, it becomes apparent that these were not gray, faceless, organization men who toed the party line or expected others to; rather, as free men will do, they thought their own thoughts and drew their own conclusions:

Paul has established for all time the Christian's right to think. He raises above the faith that is valid by tradition that knowledge that flows from the spirit of Christ. There lived in him an unlimited, uninterrupted, reverence for truth. He accepts only those bonds which are imposed by love, not those imposed by scholastic authority. . . . The result of this first appearance of the activity of a great thinker in Christianity, is to establish for all time the confidence that the

Christian faith has nothing to fear from the power of thought, even if the latter is disturbing to tranquility, is apt to provoke disputes which seem to promise little fruit for piety. . . . Paul is the patron saint of thought in Christianity. All who think to serve the gospel of Christ by destroying the liberty of thinking must hide their faces from him. (Albert Schweitzer)

Instead of flattening the nail that sticks up, the Gospel is about embracing what is unique in our own personality and in each other's personalities and running with it. The Gospel is about our blossoming forth, that we might become ever more uniquely ourselves as we come into:

The glorious liberty of the children of God. (Romans 8:21)

Liberty was never intended to be an end in itself but it provides us with the autonomy and latitude we need to learn at our own pace, get new insights, make hard choices, such as are required for us to grow to our true stature in Christ, our will being free to choose God's will, the cosmos itself being founded on the basis of freedom to choose:

The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:
and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ;
if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

(Romans 8:16-18)

There is always the big IF, that being our own willingness to say yes to God, not on a once-for-all basis but on a continuing basis.

Liberty, if not tempered by a sense of responsibility to God and service to humanity, soon loses its glory and degenerates into licentiousness.

For though I am free of all men, I have made myself a servant of all, . . . (I Corinthians 9:19)

To possess a heart for service as Paul did is a gift from God, which gift can only reveal itself from within; it cannot be coerced. That which is freely given as a gift is not of law; rather, it is of grace, an unmerited favor, rightly to be received with thanksgiving. As a child of freedom, Paul confidently identified freedom's wellspring. He said:

Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. (Galatians 4:26)

If we truly knew which Jerusalem was free and which one was in bondage with her children, we would not make the mistake of confusing the one with the other. Why look to an earthly mother, to "mother church" – much less, to earthly Jerusalem – which, daily murders God's children with impunity when we have a mother above?

AWAY WITH HIERARCHY

But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. (Matthew 23:8-11)

When God the Father established, as Paul said, “one mediator between man and God, the man, Christ Jesus” (I Timothy 2:5-6), that was a big NO! to hierarchical religion. When God established, as Paul said, “the freedom that is ours in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 2:4), that was a big YES! to personal autonomy.

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free and be not entangled again with a yoke of bondage. (Galatians 5:1)

A society of friends

I [Paul] have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. (I Corinthians 3:6)

Something was happening across the known world in the first century AD, from Britain round about to India – namely, a home fellowship movement called “Nazarene.” We know of this from multiple sources, including the charging statement against Paul when he stood in the dock in Caesarea before Governor Felix, claiming that he was:

... a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout all the world was a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. (Acts 24: 5)

Oh dear, a ringleader no less! Sounds scary. So what were these illicit Nazarene rings up to that had the Jewish Establishment in such a lather? Paul tells us:

When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. (I Corinthians 14:26)

Justin Martyr, about 150 AD, provides us with a fuller account:

And the wealthy among us help the needy; and we always keep together; and for all things wherewith we are supplied, we bless the Maker of all through His Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Ghost. And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings,

according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. (Defense to the Roman Senate)

One of the charges against Paul was his being the ringleader of a sect. The word “sect” comes from the word section, a part of the whole. By their nature, sects are tightly controlled. But Paul and the other apostles controlled nothing.

That is precisely why the Nazarene movement could spread so freely. The Ethiopian who had a brief, one day encounter with Philip, was free to go home to Ethiopia, not as the representative of an organization, but as the carrier of a message. Instead of an organization, there was an organism, namely, the life of God in the heart of man.

The good news is one of inclusion. It’s organizing principle is the welcoming open hand held out in friendship; the welcoming hand is God’s. The transaction occurs in the heavenlies. Water baptism on profession of faith is the prescribed earthly sign.

Thus we see that instead of abolishing the Abrahamic faith, as some wrongly suppose Jesus did, Jesus expand and revitalized it, such that faithful people everywhere might proclaim “Father Abraham,” as those who are truly his spiritual children.

As for Saul, he made havoc of the community (*ekklesia*), entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. (Acts 8:3)

It is clear from the context that Saul was not picking up people *en mass* as would be the case had he interrupted a meeting in progress; rather, he was going for scattered individuals in their homes. Therefore *ekklesia* is rightly translated in this instance as “community,” rather than as “congregation,” as Tyndale translated it; much less is it “church,” as the authorized *King James Version* translated it. As most English translations have it, Jesus said to Peter:

“Upon this rock I will build my Church (*ekklesia*); and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18)

By reason of this translation alone, it is axiomatic for most Christians to believe, first, that the Church IS, and, secondly, since presumably God ordained it, that we’re obliged to join it, the only remaining issue being identifying which is the true Church.

Is the true Church the one headquartered in Rome? Salt Lake City? Brooklyn? Boston? Nashville? (This list could be much extended.) Conversely, noted Hebrew and Greek scholar, James Tabor, in an open letter to supporters of his translation project stated:

The *Original Bible [Project]* will be one of the few modern English translations of the Greek

Christian Scriptures in which the word "church," so sacred to millions, *will not appear!*

Is this sophistry or scholarship? Is the Church for real or just a mirage? Let us reason this out, biblical Greek, albeit God breathed, is not angel talk, rather, it is idiosyncratic, idiosyncratic human talk, requiring close attention to context. As for the word "church," scholars tell us it came from the German word, *kirche*, which itself derived from *kyriakon*, a Greek word meaning, "the Lord's house."

In consulting William Tyndale's 16th century New Testament, we find he used the word "church" only twice, once in *Acts 14:13* and once again in *Acts 19: 37*. In each instance the reference is to a pagan place of worship, the Lord's house being a pagan Lord, i.e., Jupiter, but in *Matthew 16: 18*, Tyndale translated *ekklesia* as "congregation." (By the way, for his heinous crime of making the Bible comprehensible in the vernacular, Tyndale was burned alive at the stake.)

Highly suspect is the business of substituting of one Greek word, *kyriakon* for another, *ekklesia*. Not translating *kyriakon* but only transliterating it is suspect. Rarely, if ever, is it appropriate to use the word "church." Its presence in the King James Version is merely a concession to its sponsor, the Church of England.

Not built out of brick and mortar, nor built by the will of man, nor observable as an exterior edifice, God's *ekklesia* exists as an interior chapel, as God's kingdom within. Those with an "edifice complex," who need a cathedral to worship in, never seem to figure it out.

Jesus' Gospel is about neighborliness, peaceableness and good works. That is what his fellowship is all about. His summoned-out community, his *ekklesia*, his little flock is capable to move stealthily through society, like leaven in bread, leaving the world a better place for its being in it, while glorifying the name of God.

Paul took seriously his responsibility to build God's community. As he said:

Besides those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily,
the care of all the summoned-out communities. (II Corinthians 11:28)

The little flock

Fear not little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:32)

In deconstructing the narrative of power, Jesus freed up local, small-scale fellowships from centralizing bureaucratic restraints to pursue unhindered ministries of reconciliation and encouragement. And there is serious, good work to be done in such a setting, that is if we are to be righteous in our food and righteous in our drink and righteous in our association with our neighbors and square with God's creation.

The reason the disciples went house to house breaking bread is because the home is the last bastion of decency in a society gone wrong and the appropriate place to operate *sub rosa*. (All that may change with the introduction of smart meters and smart appliances. According to the former head of the CIA, General Betrayus, they intend to start listening to us through our dishwashers.) Who ever gave the all clear signal?

The breaking of bread from home to home is qualitatively different from what happens in a congregational setting. Where one involves the coming together in face-to-face encounter, the other involves a crowd of strangers passively looking at the backs of each others' heads, while gazing upward toward someone on a raised platform. While hymns sung in the home may not equal for grandeur those sung in a church, when they are heartfelt, they are sweet music to God.

Albeit modest in scope, Jesus' approach is revolutionary in its potential in the exercise of moral authority. His generous universalism transcends every form of boundary-setting sectarianism. If we have learned anything over the last 2000 years, it is that God does not indwell organizations. He indwells people. Grant folk their autonomy.

Let us not rue the day of small deeds or good examples. Unlike a sect or congregation a community of autonomous homes can comfortably tolerate a diversity of ways, a multiplicity of paths, where Jews can be Jews and Gentiles be Gentiles.

Pray, sing, dance, solemn or jovial, we make of our fellowships what we will. Expressing the freedom that is ours in Jesus Christ, Paul wrote:

How is it then, brethren? when ye are assembled, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a language, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done to edification.

(II Corinthians 14:26)

Eldership

Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor
in the word and doctrine. (I Timothy 5:17)

As opportunity arises and as circumstances permit, local, autonomous bodies of elders, *presbuteros*, are formed to oversee the work. We have the example of Paul and Barnabas appointing elders in Acts 14:23. And Paul asks Titus (Titus 1:5) to appoint elders for the Isle of Crete.

Do elders have authority over every believer who might happen to wander into their territory? or does their authority extend only to those who voluntarily submit themselves to them? The latter and this only in a work context.

The place of a board of elders is to oversee the work, supervising the various activities which any well-ordered community requires. To be sure not much glory attaches to low-key, behind-the-scenes, guidance and organization. But that's part of its virtue: that only work-horses – not show-horses – show up.

The point is: it's never the place of an elder (or anyone else) to come between a man and his Maker. ELDERS OVERSEE WORK – NOT PEOPLE. The work they are responsible for is their own, not someone else's. When a board of elders puts its own house in order, it positions itself to attract worthy individuals to assist it in the carrying out of worthy tasks honoring of the Lord. A following is earned. It's not automatic.

But if a board of elders should become hidebound or lose touch with the community it is suppose to be serving or worse, becomes oppressive, then it becomes desirable, nay, necessary for others to shake dust and move on. It is the nature of a free spirit, as a living stone, to list where it will and not allow him- or herself to become stepping stones, on some designing person's upward career path.

And so again we ask: what is the elders' authority? The answer: moral authority. It is the power of a good example. It is the power of practicality and steady purposefulness. Always the need is for shepherds who lead the flock, not cattle herders who would drive it. Thus Peter exhorts the elders, not:

. . . as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. (I Peter 5:3-4)

Koinonia / Mutual Concern

... you were called [*kaleo*] into the fellowship [the *koinonia*] of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

(I Corinthians 1:9)

Phil. 1:7 ***synkoinonos*** -- partakers along with

Phil. 2:1 ***koinonia*** -- shared communion

Phil. 3:10 ***koinonia*** -- make common cause

Phil. 4:14 ***synkoinoneo*** -- making common cause with

Phil. 4:15 ***koinoneo*** -- shared

God's Community is founded on God's Golden Rule of mutual concern:

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them:

for this is the law and the prophets.

(Matthew 7:12)

Neither a victim nor a victimizer be but a true friend, practicing reciprocity -- *koinonia* -- a fundamental, biblical imperative:

to love one another

Be hospitable to one another

let each esteem others better than themselves

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another

for we are all members of one another. .

that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against another.

(Romans 13:8, I Peter 4:9, Phil. 2:3, Ephesians 4:25, I Corinthians 4:6)

And in happy consequence:

we have fellowship [*koinonia*] one with another

(I John 1:7)

Believers are finite and fallible; though ruled from above and from within by God, yet we need each other. For just as two logs on a fire will kindle each other, so also do we as believers kindle each other; but just as a coal off the hearth will burn less brightly, so also will we burn less brightly, absent holy fellowship.

Walking in the light brings personal transcendence, walking in holy friendship brings mutual transcendence; building holy community brings societal transcendence. It is the way back to Eden. On what basis then do we relate? on the basis of mutual respect and love, with all subsumed under one tribal covenant, that being Abrahamic:

The Operative Covenant

The glory of God appeared to our father, Abraham, . . . (Acts 7:2)

As there is only one over-arching Covenant, so likewise is the seed one, said Paul:

Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds,
as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ. (Galatians 3:16)

Likewise regarding the promises; though many promises have been made, yet there is one over-arching promise. Said Paul in chains to King Agrippa:

And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers:
unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night hope to come.
(Acts 26:6-7)

And what is that over-arching Promise? that it is God who will supply the lamb:

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked. and behold behind him a ram caught in the
thicket by his horns and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt
offering in the stead of his son. (Genesis 22:13)

Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. (John 1:29)

Not untouched by human infirmity, our Savior, as the scapegoat and lamb of God,
drank to the dregs our every woe:

. . . who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with
strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in
that he feared; . . . (Hebrews 5:7)

Then, too, there is one inheritance, as we see from Paul who weaves together the
various threads: :

And if ye be Christ's then ye are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.
(Galatians 3:29)

Notice how it all comes together through faith:

The promise, that he should be heir to the world, was not to Abraham or his seed through
the law, but through the righteousness of faith. (Romans 4:13)

And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect.

(Galatians 3:17)

Above we see Paul defending the Abrahamic Covenant from disannulment. Oddly enough, the antinomian Church, for reasons of its own, fervently wishes to see the Abrahamic Covenant disannulled, claiming that Jesus or Paul were the ones who did away with it, albeit without producing a shred of evidence showing that this was so.

Since the Abrahamic Covenant consists of qualified promises for qualified people, it represents a problem for an institution that is seemingly hellbent on operating without any standards whatsoever.

“Oh, but we are a New Covenant Church,” some will claim. But by the Law of First Mention, a thing in Scripture is that which is was first defined as being, and there is no way in this instance to square what the Bible has to say about the New Covenant and present circumstances. Read it and see. I am thinking particularly of this verse:

And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, know

Jehovah: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith

Jehovah: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:34)

This passage, which can hardly be squared with present times and present circumstances, is where certain theologians, the ones operating under a deep Dispensationalist impress, get down right tricky, claiming that there are two New Covenants, one for the Jew and one for the Church! Meanwhile, a covenantless church falls in a crack between the two covenants: the one which it assumes to be passé, albeit it is not, and the other, which it assumes to be current, albeit it is yet future.

Yes, we are glad to acknowledge the New Covenant for which Jesus paid the downpayment and we will have more to say about it hereafter when we speak about the blessed hope. Meanwhile in the here-and-now, there is the Abrahamic if/then subjunctive to which God's community does well to pay heed:

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; **then** will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

(II Chronicles 7:14)

For **if** ye live after the flesh, **[then]** ye shall die: but **if** ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, **[then]** ye shall live.

(Romans 8:13)

The mediator

For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;
who gave himself a ransom for all, . . . (I Timothy 2:5-6)

Paul employs various titles for Jesus, one being, as we see above, “mediator;” another being “the man.” One title not used by Paul of Jesus is “God.” Paul never called Jesus “God.” Because we live in a religious climate where Trinitarian presuppositions are de rigueur, many, when they read, “in the name of the Father, in the name of the Son, in the name of the Holy Spirit,” as in the baptismal formulation found in Matthew’s gospel, automatically hear “God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.” It is but a small leap from this to assume that Jesus is Jehovah and Jehovah is Jesus, reasoning: God the Father, God the Son, they’re one and the same, right?

Not right. It is this line of thinking that unfits Jesus to play the role of mediator. That role was passed to Mary. “Hail Mary Mother of God,” and “lead us by the hand, take us to your son above.” But once Mary, the mediatrix, was declared “Queen of Heaven,” then she, too, became so exalted that we needed a mediator to get to her. Naturally the Church finds it has a role to play in all of this, with a priest being our mediator. It often seems to come to that, an institution that serves as an agent of Divine intervention.

Paul writes of Christ, not as being God, but as being the wisdom of God:

We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

(I Corinthians 1:23-24)

God or not God: maybe we can get a clearer perspective on who Jesus is by consulting the Old Testament because therein exists an entire chapter, Proverbs, ch. 8, which not only provides us with an authoritative, retelling of Genesis, ch. 1, but also tells us about the role of the Messiah, in the very voice of the Messiah:

Jehovah possessed me in the beginning of his way,
before his works of old.

I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning,
or ever the earth was.

When there was no depths, I was brought forth;

when there were no fountains abounding with water.
 Before the mountains were settled,
 before the hills I was brought forth:
 while as yet he had not made the earth,
 nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world.
 When he prepared the heavens, I was there:
 when he set a compass on the face of the depth:
 when he established the clouds above:
 when he strengthened the fountains in the deep:
 when he gave to the sea his degree,
 that the waters should not pass his commandment:
 when he appointed the foundations of the earth:
 then I was by him, as one brought up with him:
 and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him;
 rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth;
 and my delights were the sons of men.

This is Good News, indeed! Jesus was with God from the beginning, delighting in the sons of man when they were yet living in the Edenic state, when they were yet in balance with God's creation. Notice above, besides there being a "he" and a "him," there is the narrator's "I" and "me." If Jesus is the "I," and the "me," who then is the "he" and the "him"? The text at its outset plainly tells us: "Jehovah." Thus we see existing two distinct individuals, with one subordinate to the other. Though sharing the same moral and spiritual being, Jesus is not Jehovah; Jehovah is not Jesus. If as above, Jesus is the one "brought forth," does this not accord with what Paul said?:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. (Colossians 1:15-16)

As a flawless mirror held up to God, Jesus perfectly reflects the light of God. Since the image of an object is not the object itself, it stands to reason that the only-begotten Son is someone other than the unbegotten Father.

"Before Abraham was I am." (John 8:58)

If Jesus pre-existed Abraham, then he also pre-existed Jews, Judea, and the tribe of Judah. To say that he was the Jewish Messiah is true enough, but to stop there is limiting or parochial. He was a carpenter, too, but who in their right mind would

stop there in characterizing him? Personified as the Wisdom of God, Jesus in Proverbs 8:32-36, speaks to us, saying:

Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children:
for blessed are they that keep my ways.
Here instruction and be wise, and refuse it not.
blessed is the man that heareth me,
watching daily at my gates,
waiting at the posts of my doors.
For whoso findeth me findeth life,
and shall obtain favor of Jehovah.
But he that sinneth against me
wrongeth his own soul:
all they that hate me love death.

Trinitarians tend to shy away from identifying Jesus with the first person narrator of Proverbs ch. 8 and I think I know why, for he self describes as having been created and of his continuing in subordination to the Father, and how is that to be squared with the traditional Trinitarian formulation that the Son is "uncreated" and "co-equal"?

Obviously godly is not the same thing as God; for sharing in God's nature and being God are two different things. But what of the familiar opening in John's Gospel?:

the word was with God and the word was God.

That might be better translated:

the word was with God and the word was divine.

When Jesus prayed, he prayed to God the Father, not to himself; likewise, he taught us to pray, not to himself, but to the Father. Yes, we address Jesus in prayer as in the closing words of the Book of Revelation: "Come Lord Jesus, Come" and we ask favors of Jesus, as well we should, for he is our mediator.

Paul's benediction reads:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14)

Functionally the three work in tandem but does that mean the three are one? Much effort was applied toward teaching the children of Israel to say *one*, as in the *Shema*:

Hear, O Israel: Jehovah our God is one Jehovah. (Deuteronomy 6:4)

No matter what many around us say about three-ness (Trinity), let us remain committed to God's one-ness (Unity).

Factionalism

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many.

If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body?

But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: and those members of the body, which we think to be less honorable, upon these we bestow more abundant honor; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honor to that part which lacked.

That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.

(I Corinthians 12:12-27)

As we see above, Paul is manfully trying to hold together the notoriously fractious,

scandal-ridden Corinthian community, when the better part of valor, it seems to me, would be just to let it go and start over, preferably with new leadership, who, hopefully, would have a clearer vision of the work that needed to be accomplished, who would not tolerate backbiters, idlers, or immoral folk. But besides all that, there was the Corinthians over-the-top religiosity. Whew! If it were me, I'd run, not walk, to the nearest exit.

Paul's advice is that "there should be no schism in the body" but Paul himself, even in his dealings with Barnabas and Peter, rightly or wrongly, felt that wrongs had been committed of such serious nature as required his parting ways with them.

And in those days, when the number of the disciples were multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.

(Acts 6:1)

It would be nice to think that with Jesus' words yet ringing in their ears, his example yet fresh in their memories, and with the impartation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that the Nazarenes would have risen above schisms and partisanship and factionalism of any kind, or the making of social or racial distinctions, and in the early years, to an amazing degree this was so, as the light of Jesus shined through and there was agreement and harmony. Yet, though emboldenment and ennoblement existed for a season, not all issues were resolved or every controversy put to bed, for Jesus' followers were folk like unto ourselves, of like passions, subject to disparate influences.

Assuredly, there must needs have been divisions if only because people tend to be passionate about what they believe, while not fully comprehending what the other fellow believes.

Nor is it altogether a bad thing that distinctively different communities arose which, to some degree or another, complemented with each other. That is how we got our canonical gospels: the Hellenistic Jews, particularly those from Galilee, gravitated to Paul and their community adopted Luke's gospel. The Hebraic Jews in Jerusalem, followers of the Lord's brother, James, used Matthew's gospel. Gentiles in Rome and Alexandria used Mark's gospel. Jews who followed Mary Magdalene used John's gospel. Contemplative Jews, particularly those living to the east of the Roman Empire, but also Jews in Egypt adopted Thomas' gospel. And there was yet another gospel, this one called: the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* and it too had a Nazarene constituency that lasted for centuries, until suppressed by the Church.

The two Jerusalems

For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a free-woman.

But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the free-woman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all.

(Galatians 4:23-26)

As we see from what Paul has to say above, there are two Jerusalems, one which is from above, the other which is from below. Our thesis is this: that the greater is our entanglement with the one from below, the less we are liable to have to do with the one which is from above, for the two are diametrically opposed.

IS JERUSALEM BELOW SPIRITUAL BABYLON?

And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and threescore days, clothed in sackcloth. . . . And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that cometh up out of the abyss shall make war with them, and shall overcome them, and kill them. And their dead bodies (shall lie) in the street of the great city, that spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.

(Revelation 11:3, 7-9)

To which metropolis in the *Book of Revelation* does the term “the great city” apply? We see above that it is a reference to old Jerusalem, the one where the two witnesses were slain, whose dead bodies were left in the street of “the great city (*hey polis megale* in Greek) “where also their Lord was crucified.” But in chapter 17 of this same book, reference is made to “Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and abominations in the Earth . . . that *great city*, which reined over the kings of the earth.”

Here we are confronted with the specter of a city having not only physical power, but also spiritual power embodying the full potentiality of human degeneracy, for it is further described as “drunken with the blood of the saints, and with blood of the martyrs of Jesus.” What city is there like this one which is so significant in human affairs that worldly, hard-nosed merchants would bewail its loss? for, when it is “utterly burned with fire . . . that great city Babylon, that mighty city! . . . the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn over her; for no man buyeth their merchandise anymore.”

Oh, boo hoo, those poor hucksters, left with no place to sell their wares. Perhaps it is because Jerusalem is the focal point of the emerging New World Order so essential to the globalization of trade that they feel its loss so acutely.

This is not to say that there won't be other significant centers of influence in the last days but only this one can order its White House lackey "Jump" and get back the reply "How high?" Only an Israeli Prime Minister can order American troops into war in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen and maybe soon Iran or Ukraine.

The apostle Peter from Jerusalem wrote, "She who is in Babylon ... sends you greetings" (1 Peter 5:13). Since Peter had never been to Babylon, he must have been speaking of it only as symbolizing the corrupt city wherein our Lord was killed. Yet from early, post-apostolic times, Christians have misread biblical prophecy, thinking Babylon meant Rome. Helping us out here, *Revelation* refers to "seven mountains" on which the whore of Babylon sits.

Traditionally Rome has been described as sitting on seven hills though in fact it encompasses many more than seven hills. But the City of Jerusalem, as well, was reckoned to be a 'City of Seven Hills,' a well-recognized fact in Jewish circles. For instance, in the *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, an 8th century A.D. Talmudic midrashic narrative (Section 10), the writer states that "Jerusalem is situated on seven hills." These seven hills Armenian Christians, who have lived many generations in Palestine, identify as: Mt. of Olives, Mt. Scopus, Mt. Zion, Mt. Moriah (the Temple mount), Golgotha, Hill of Moses, and Mt. Herzl. Helping us resolve this question, the apostle Paul states clearly enough that the anti-Christ will reveal himself from the Temple in Jerusalem, not from the Vatican in Rome:

Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day will not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition: who opposeth and exulteth himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped; so that he as God, showing himself that he is God.

(II Thessalonians 2:3-4)

Our prayer is for the peace of Jerusalem, that in its streets will again be heard the voice of melody, the voice of the bridegroom, the voice of the bride. Meanwhile, it is New Jerusalem that liberates, for if we are born again from above, then we will go above. Conversely, if we are born again from below, we will go below. Earthly Jerusalem's occupiers are under judgment. May their well-deserved fate not be our own.

Canonicity

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

(II Timothy 3:16-17)

Now all we need to know is what Paul meant by “all.” Since Paul raised it as an issue of importance, we would do well to find out what he and other Nazarenes were reading as Old Testament, especially as it impacts our understanding as to what they were writing as New Testament. Origen spoke aright when he observed that:

The beginning of the Gospel is nothing but the whole Old Testament.

Again the same question arises, what did Origen mean by “whole”? Let us not suppose in the absence of an authoritative pronouncement from God (of which there is none) that we can answer this definitively. There are certain core documents about which all are in agreement but there are also border areas that are ill-defined.

At the time of Jesus and rabbi Hillel - the origins of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism - there was, and there was not, a "Bible." ... There was a Bible in the sense that there were certain sacred books widely recognized by the Jews as foundational to their religion and supremely authoritative for religious practice. There was not, however, a Bible in the sense that the leaders of the general Jewish community had specifically considered, debated, and definitively decided the full range of which books were supremely and permanently authoritative and which ones - no matter how sublime, useful, or beloved - were not.

(The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible)

A change of Scripture signifies a change of religion. For instance, the Samaritans have the Torah i.e., the five Books of Moses, plus Joshua. That is all. This, their canon, represents their understanding as to what constitutes God's standard for sacred literature. Rabbinical Judaism has the Tenakh, thirty-nine books consisting of Torah (Law), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings); Roman Catholicism has 73 books, consisting of testaments Old and New. (Included in this number are seven books, sometimes referred to as intertestamental, deuterocanonical, or apocryphal yet, in their view, canonical); Orthodoxy has 75 books; Protestantism, 66; the Mormons, 80 plus, while the Church in Ethiopia has two canons - one long, one short.

In part, it is a matter of allegiance: the Samaritans look to Moses but not to David. The Jews look to David but not to Jesus; Christians look to the Jesus of the New Testament while Mormons look to all of the above, plus Joseph Smith and the Book

of Mormon. But who has the right to determine which books are in and which are out? To say that it's self-evident or obvious when all the while thoughtful, well-educated people differ, is to fly in the face of the facts.

The existence of many canons is proof positive of a lack of consensus. While it should be a matter of private judgment, every communion takes pride in its own canon. How seriously is this taken? Very. For instance, a little known fact regarding the Bible's removal from American public schools: it did not happen, as one might suppose, in the 20th Century due to a challenge from atheists or by the ACLU but in the 19th Century due to a conflict between immigrant Catholics and Protestants in Boston. No room for compromise existed. No one wanted their child exposed to someone else's Bible, be it *King James* or *Douay*.

Is it possible to believe in God but not believe in God's miracle: a Bible perfectly preserved, complete, knowable?

(Miriam Weinstein, *A Nation of Words*)

Actually, living with ambiguity and uncertainty is far better than having the kind of cocksure, know-it-all certitude that commonly passes for biblical learning. Thus, in response to Miriam Weinstein's question, the answer is, unequivocally, yes, for only the anxious-minded would care to see the great, unfathomable ocean that is the Bible reduced to a "knowable" backwater which is biblicism.

Typically, hierarchical denominationalism, be it rabbinical Judaism or organized Christianity, does not encourage its communicants to think for themselves, which is why it defines minutely the doctrines that are to be believed and from which they are not to deviate. Yet it is a believer's prerogative to form his or her own opinions and change them as he or she grows.

Thinking to clarify matters, organized religion only muddles them further by attempting to define for their respective members what constitutes God's Word, then, compounding error with error, attempting to define its meaning. While this may help bind a communion's adherents together more tightly, it necessarily alienates all others whose scriptural canons or interpretations differ, a surefire recipe for division. The remedy is respect for individual judgment. If Jesus is the Truth, then the Bible is but the truth about the Truth, while our interpretation of the Bible is, at best, the truth about the truth about the Truth. To make a litmus test of our interpretation is to go the sectarian road.

To say, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," settles nothing. Do we really know

what God said? If so, do we really know what He meant or how to apply the meaning correctly? Where then lies the path between denying altogether the possibility of identifying God-inspired books and dependance on a religious institution to define them for us? It would be for us to make this a matter of personal discovery, not by starting with a doctrinal claim, but with a question mark. After that, instead of expecting a once-for-all discovery, let's make of it an ongoing adventure of discovery. An experiential approach can make the Bible come alive. Far better is it to form a point of view slowly, hesitantly, than smugly thinking it's all so simple, so self-evident.

Maybe it is not God's communicating inadequately, but our listening inattentively that is the source of misunderstanding, for, in substituting what is programmatic and mechanistic, do we not inadvertently tune out the Spirit?

Let us ask again, which Bible? whose Bible? To such Protestants as adhere to the swinging-door theory, that God closed the Old Testament canon 400 years before opening it again for the New, it will come as no small surprise to learn that Paul's canon of Scripture looked rather more like Orthodoxy's and Catholicism's than their own, which is to say, the idea of an intertestamental period is a fictitious construct.

Evidence confirming this comes from the recovered *Testimonia* demonstrating much Nazarene dependence on the so-called "deutero-canonical" books establishing Jesus' messianic claim.) If anything, however, the Nazarene's Scriptural canon is as distinct from those already mentioned as they are from each other.

A text I would like to bring forward for consideration as to its inspiration is the Wisdom of Solomon, a book appearing in the Catholic Bible and in the Orthodox Bible, but absent since the mid-19th century from most Protestants' Bibles, having been excised under a Judaizing tendency which was then operative in the English-speaking world. It was then that Protestantism synchronized its Old Testament Bible to conform with that of their synagogue buddies, this in lieu of historical Christian practice.

For the ungodly said, reasoning with themselves, but not aright,
Our life is short and tedious,
and in the death of a man there is no remedy;
neither was there any man known to have returned from the grave.
For we are born at all adventure: and we shall be hereafter as though
we had never been: for the breath in our nostrils is as smoke,
and a little spark in the moving of our hearts,

which being extinguished our body shall be turned into ashes
and our spirit shall vanish as the soft air;
And our name shall be forgotten in time
And no man shall have our works in remembrance,
and our life shall pass away as the trace of a cloud,
and shall be dispersed as a mist,
that is driven away with the beams of the sun,
and overcome with the heat thereof.
For our time is a very shadow that passeth away;
and after our end there is no returning:
for it is fast sealed, so that no man cometh again.
Come on therefore, let us enjoy the good things that are present:
and let us speedily use the creatures like as in youth.
Let us fill ourselves with costly wine and ointments;
and let no flower of the spring pass us by.
Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds, before they be withered:
Let us none of us go without his part of our voluptuousness:
let us leave tokens of our joyfulness in every place;
for this is our portion, and our lot is this.
Let us oppress the poor righteous man,
let us not spare the widow,
nor reverence the ancient gray hairs of the aged.
Let our strength be the law of justice:
for that which is feeble is found to be of nothing worth.
Therefore let us lie in wait for the righteous;
because he is not of our turn,
and he is clean contrary to our doings;
he upbraideth us with our offending the law,
and objecteth to our infamy the transgressing of our education.
He professeth to have the knowledge of God;
and he calleth himself the child of the Lord.
He was made to reprove our thoughts.
He is grievous unto us even to behold:

for his life is not like other men's,
 his ways are of another fashion.
 We are esteemed of him as counterfeits:
 he abstaineth from our ways as from filthiness:
 he pronounceth the end of the just to be blessed,
 and maketh his boast that God is his father.
 Let us see if his words be true:
 and let us prove what shall happen in the end of him.
 For if the just man be the son of God, he will help him,
 and deliver him from the hand of his enemies.
 Let us examine him with despitefulness and torture,
 that we may know his meekness, and prove his patience.
 Let us condemn him with a shameful death:
 for by his own sayings he shall be respected.
 Such things they did imagine, and were deceived:
 for their own wickedness hath blinded them.
 As for the mysteries of God, they knew them not:
 neither hoped they for the wages of righteousness,
 nor discerned a reward for blameless souls.
 For God created man to be immortal,
 and made him to be an image of his own eternity.
 Nevertheless through envy of the devil
 came death into the world;
 and they that do hold fast of his side do find it. (chapter 2:1-24)

Allusions to the *Wisdom of Solomon* are widely spread in the New Testament:

. . . the Book of Wisdom presents a wonderful preparation to the New Testament Revelation. The New Testament writers appear perfectly familiar with this deuterocanonical writing (cf. Matthew 27: 42-43, with Wisdom 2:13-18; Romans 11:34, with Wisdom 9:13; Ephesians 6:13-17, with Wisdom 5:18-19; Hebrews 1:3, with Wisdom 7:26, etc. It is true that to justify their rejection of the Book of Wisdom from the Canon, many Protestants have claimed that in 8:19-20, its author admits the error of the pre-existence of the human soul. But this incriminating passage, when viewed in the light of its context, yields a perfectly orthodox sense.

(*New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*)

Gender Equality

My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. . . .

But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.

(James 2:1, 9)

To illustrate his point, James in his epistle utilizes as his hypothetical example the unfairness of a rich man being afforded preferential treatment to a poor man by a Nazarene assembly. This no-respecter-of-persons principle can be applied to the male/female dichotomy or to any other division as would arbitrarily limit spiritual fellowship. Paul too was of such a mind. He was like a mother bear in defense of its cubs when protecting Gentile believers' right to be Gentiles and not have to become Jews:

But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.

For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation. But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews? (Galatians 2:11-14)

The operative word above is compel, "why compellest thou." Here Paul displays an excellent grasp of the importance of maintaining strictest equality. In this he was straight and true but then falls away from such a standard when it comes to gender:

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. (I Timothy 2:11-14)

Paul, why would you *compel* the ladies to be silent? That's not right. The Spirit is where the Spirit goes. And what of this business about Adam and Eve? It is hardly fair to hold against an entire gender the infractions of their grandmother. Adam's sin, Eve's deception? Men are no more responsible for Adam's sin, than women are for Eve's deception. Besides, we don't judge people by category, only as individuals. Truly, a Spirit filled lady has as much right to be heard as does anyone else.

. . . saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your *daughters* shall prophesy, . . .

(Acts 2:17)

Was there not anyone to stand up to Paul as Paul did Peter to his face? If not, too

bad, for I believe he needed correcting on the matter. Admittedly Paul was a larger-than-life individual and confronting him might have been a somewhat awkward thing to do. Nevertheless, it matters not who the man is, James, Peter, Paul, truth is truth. Everything stands or falls on its merits, not on any man's say-so.

There is no record of Mary Magdalene and Paul as having ever met. I imagine had they done so that she could have set him straight on a few matters. After all, Jesus made her apostle to the apostles when he appeared to her first and then commissioned her to tell them that he had arisen from death to life.

Meanwhile one of the finest formulation of equality is Paul's, who tells us why, for ye are *all* one in Christ Jesus:

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-29)

MARANATHA – O LORD come (I CORINTHIANS 16:22)

In his letter to Titus, Paul's theme is the life we live as it relates to prophecy:

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that *blessed hope*, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works. (Titus 2:11-14)

The “blessed hope” Paul connects to “the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ;” a sober reminder that we should live righteously “in this present world . . . [as] a peculiar people, zealous of good works.”

That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ . . . (Philippians 1:10)

In II Thessalonians, ch. 2, Paul gives us a heads-up as to what is to be (paraphrased):

I know that you have heard that Jesus has come and you missed it. Don't worry. Jesus will not come for you until two 'signs' take place first: rebellion and the man of lawlessness. Jesus will not come to gather you to Himself until that takes place first.

Attendant to Pre-tribulation rapture doctrine is the anxiety that Christ might come at any time and we be left behind. Let Paul's sober-minded truths be contrasted with it:

Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand.

Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.

Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what with holdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.

And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved.

And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.

Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work.

(II Thessalonians 2)

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

(I Thessalonians 4: 16-18)