

# Reality Checks for Christians

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## Introduction

There are only a few pure anarchists in the world today, thank the Lord! Hardly anyone operates in this life without a set of rules. But, the rules people respect may have a myriad of sources. All objective codes of conduct must come from authors who have gained the respect of a following, but some people have a subjective source, counting only their own instincts as their rules. They rule themselves. Yet, all rule-followers recognize that it is best to have some kind of law, whether it proceeds from a previously established authority, or it is devised within one's own mind. No matter what the inner or outer source may be, the trouble with all of us is that, though we are not anarchists, we have trouble obeying authority.

The person who has accepted and submitted himself to the reign of a set of rules established by someone else will nearly always fall short of ideal compliance. Even the person who devises his own set of rules of conduct will often fail to honor and obey them completely.

Following our failures, we may experience a number of reactions. For some of us, the affliction of conscience makes us miserable, until we either return to our self-imposed duty, or salve our conscience by wandering into the paths of denial and self-justification. Other disobedient souls among us may attempt to justify their miscreancy by critical analyses of the law to which they submit, claiming that it is either malformed, or unreasonable, or too strict, or lacking in strong authority.

The inevitable picture we see in this is one of an unstable, undisciplined, unconstrained, and unabashed body of people. Yet, in the almost universal recognition of the need for some kind of law, we could all profit through a law that leads to a stable, disciplined, constrained, and abashed life.

In the midst of our unsteady society, we have a group of people called Christians, who have been challenged to adhere to a superior, exalted, ideal and rewarding existence. All of them acknowledge the divine origin of this idealistic life, but many of them have neither fully embraced it, nor performed it faithfully. They still follow the "conventional wisdom" of humankind, even though it hardly ever confirms, or even coincides, with divine revelation.

Therefore, borrowing from a modern catch-phrase, I propose to set before us some "Reality Checks" offered by God in the Bible to those of us who are caught up in the "Conventional Wisdom" of our age. It is my hope that my readers will be the sort of people who will concede that conventional wisdom is both temporal and ephemeral, and will also acknowledge that the revealed Word of God presents the eternal reality in which we should put our trust.

## Chapter One

### Reality vs. Unreality

At a distant point in my past, only vaguely remembered, I suddenly came to the realization that the solid things around me were not "real." It may have been on one of those hot, sticky, summer Sundays, when I sat uncomfortably beside my devout mother in a frame church building, hearing the verbal droning of the preacher competing with the mechanical hum of several oscillating electric fans hanging on the walls, or it may have been some time later, when I was a little older, and sat in cool splendor in the modern, brick air-conditioned building that succeeded that first one, listening to the successor of that other preacher. Yet, though I cannot pinpoint the time, nor identify the preacher of the hour, I do recall the odd sensation of learning that reality was only to be discovered in the spiritual realm in which God dwelt.

The word which triggered this discovery was "eternal." Simple child-like faith embraced that word, and led me to a whole new experience. Once the discovery was made, I began to hear and read familiar passages of Scripture in that new light. When Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:50 that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither does corruption inherit incorruption," he meant for me to realize that the corruptible body I live in is not the one with "staying power." It will slowly decay in life and, when dead, will never be restored from its dissolution in the dust. I read in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 that the new body of my resurrection which replaces it will never corrupt, and so becomes the "real" body, the new, the enduring, the spiritual body. Again, the "eternal tabernacles" of Luke 16:9 shall replace the aging, disintegrating structures of this world. The "eternal inheritance" of Hebrews 9:15 shall exceed to the Nth dimension the "earnest of our inheritance" spoken of in Ephesians 1:14. The "eternal kingdom" of 2 Peter 1:11 will survive beyond the existence of the strongest, most durable government of men, as the prophet said in Daniel 2:44. I firmly accepted the truth that the "life eternal," promised in scores of Bible references, was the "real" life; not this vulnerable, physical, ailing, frustrating life we experience here.

It would be a marvelous transformation of modern Christianity, if the disciples of the Lord would look at these things in the same way the harassed, harried, hounded, apostle Paul did. He said, in a moment when his frustrations were at their peak, "Wherefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is for the moment, works for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen; for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Instead, we are faced with the undeniable fact that the church is filled with people who have settled comfortably into the feeling that they are earthbound, rather than heaven-bound. They seek the comforts of this life, rather than the future bliss of life eternal. Instead of embracing the altruistic nature of Christianity, they nurture the most

common and yet most perverse of human characteristics-- selfishness. This trait blights all attempts to "become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). It is the selfish person who listens most readily to the sophistry of "conventional wisdom," and afterward stops his ears, lest he hear a biblical "reality check" that contradicts what he has already determined to do.

There is nothing wrong in pursuing our "enlightened self-interest," if the "light" which "enlightens" has a divine source. Failure lies along the path of a self-gratification, when it persists unhindered in the face of the eternal truths preserved for us in the Bible. These truths contain "reality checks" for those who may be inclined to be ruled by "conventional wisdom."

Selfish self-serving self-centeredness is at the root of many spiritual failures. It is, to adopt a common exclamation, "Unreal!" It is the ultimate unreality. But every fault that plagues the Christian is met and rebuked by a divine "reality check." Here is a "checklist."

- (a) "Rugged Individualism," a dogma so prevalent among freedom-obsessed Americans, is rebuked by the wisdom of Altruism.
- (b) Indulgence is rebuked by the doctrine of Self-control.
- (c) Greed is rebuked by commands to be liberal, even sacrificial, in Benevolence.
- (d) Opinion is rebuked by calls to practice The Faith.
- (e) Pride is rebuked by demands for Humility.
- (f) Complacency is rebuked by calls for Self-criticism.
- (g) Adultery is rebuked by a divine prescription for Marital Faithfulness.
- (h) Divorce is rebuked as rebellion against God's design for Marital permanence.
- (i) Promiscuous and perverted sex is rebuked by the call for personal, physical Sanctification.
- (j) Strife is rebuked by divine commendations of Peacemakers.
- (k) Controversy is rebuked by appeals for Unity.
- (l) Criticism of others is rebuked by the command to exercise Loving Edification.
- (m) Partyism is rebuked by the consistent depiction of "One Body In Christ."
- (n) Experimentation in sin is rebuked by the wisdom of profiting from Vicarious Experience.
- (o) Tolerance, so popular in the midst of so much religious diversity, is rebuked by the evidence of Divine Intolerance.
- (p) Worldliness is rebuked by the call for Godliness.
- (q) Love expressed only in words is rebuked by the principle of Love Shown Through Deeds.
- (r) Hate, Jealousy, and Envy are rebuked by commands for Brotherly Love.

In each of these things that identify Christians attempting to live by the tenets of Conventional Wisdom, divine revelation arrays an impressive body of Reality Checks. As a writer of books, I realize that the use of transitory terms, such as "conventional

wisdom," and "reality checks," can quickly render this treatise "dated," if not "obsolete." But, these phrases are simply current faddish ways of saying "the wisdom of the world" (1 Corinthians 1:20), and "the wisdom that is from above" (James 3:17). "Conventional Wisdom" can be defined as the consensus reached by the majority of persons who follow the normal paths of human wisdom. This is manifested by a contemporary trust in relative truth. In contrast, absolute truth is to be discovered in the pages of divine revelation, the Bible. Here we will find our "Reality Checks," those sobering facts and gems of divine wisdom carelessly over-looked or ignored by those who selfishly reject true wisdom.

A cadre of worldly wise men have filled the shelves of libraries and book stores with frothy "how to" books that offer advice on the way Christians should live. Each year sees new offers by these men, beautifully bound and illustrated. The rationale that drives such new ventures is undoubtedly derived from the assumption that people are no longer impressed with the plain words found in the Bible, even though they may confess verbally that it is the inspired word of God. They turn away from divine revelation to search through the myriad pages of human rhetoric and novel literary devices, hoping to find profitable (and perhaps, entertaining) spiritual instruction. New authors trying to enter this field of lucrative writing must inevitably think, "What unique contribution to wisdom can I make by writing yet another book on the subject?" The untried adventurer attempting to gain some influence in this field usually decides that he can only attract a loyal clientele of readers by jazzing up the old themes with new ways of saying the same things.

I humbly admit that I hope to gain readers for my words, just as much as any other author. The only difference between myself and other writers is that my purpose will be to enhance the appeal of another author, God. I want to help my readers discover or perhaps resurrect their confidence in the plain but forceful Word of God. The "reality checks" to be found there, I hope, will serve to be mental choke-chains like those used in training dogs, jerking us back in restraint, and conditioning us to accept the force of what is revealed in the Word. Perhaps this tactic will renew the reader's interest in deep study of the Bible, unencumbered by human sophistry and the literary devices of writers of modern "wisdom literature," whose credentials are less than divine.

"And now, Israel, what doth Jehovah thy God require of thee, but to fear Jehovah thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve Jehovah thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, to keep the commandments of Jehovah, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?" (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

## Chapter 2

### Looking Out For Number 1

That remarkable apostle, Paul, wrote to his protege Timothy, and said, "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!" (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

The careless reader of this passage might presume that Paul is using the phrase "last days" to mean a time segment which mankind has yet to reach, the future era that many refer to as the "end time," and that at such a time these evil traits of the sinful world will suddenly appear and threaten the church. But these selfish traits of Paul's "last days" can be seen in a measure in every age of human history, and especially, because we are near observers, in our own.

The casual reader may also conclude that Paul's list of evil traits is to be found only in sinners who have never known the Lord, but in reality he says that people with these worldly characteristics are those who have a "form of godliness," while "denying its power." Could he be saying that such evils appear among those who profess Christianity? Honesty would impel us to answer, unfortunately, "Yes!" This unsavory truth is why the great majority of souls world-wide are "turned off" by viewing the antics of these flawed representatives of Christianity, and in their disgust they may embrace a competitive religious system of men that uses inquisitor-like enforcers to compel them to adhere to its moral demands, or they may abandon the faith and profess no religion at all. They have allowed the worldly conduct of Christians to veil the true moral superiority of Christianity from their eyes. If they had an undistracted exposure to the Bible, and could grasp the moral ideals found within it, without being blinded by gross examples of hypocrisy, they might marvel at the consistency and ascendancy of the Christian system. However, they would be hardpressed in these days to find a body of its adherents anywhere on the face of the earth who were following that system faithfully.

Those who profess to be "Christians," yet exhibit some of the evil traits listed by Paul, often justify their conduct by pleas of circumstance. They are prone to say, "Oh, I might have done something wrong, but you don't understand.....that was a time when the pressures were so great on me that...," and go on to explain why they thought it expedient at that time to practice some trait in Paul's odious list. Under the pressure of circumstances, from which they apparently had no inclination to escape, the less demanding "Conventional Wisdom" of their surrounding world evidently carried more weight with them than the Wisdom of God.

But arrayed against their self-serving accommodation is a Reality Check. Against such

selfishness is presented the selfless example of Jesus. We are commanded by apostolic exhortation, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God (or, "did not cling to his prerogatives as God's equal"), but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:5-8). This example of self-denial led Jesus to exhort His disciples to do the same thing, with the words, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25). This counsel was given after Jesus accused Peter of being mindful of the "things of men," rather than the "things of God" (verse 23). The apostle Paul drives home this Reality Check by saying, "For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus; that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him Who died for them and rose again" (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

Such precepts do not readily appeal to Americans who are fond of stories about "rugged individualists." These tales illustrate the cherished human doctrine that has been pounded in their ears for so many generations; "Do your own thing. Say what you want. Do what you want. Let no one say, 'Nay.'" Political freedom has its undeniable merits. It unleashes the genius of inventors. It encourages entrepreneurs. It generates an astounding diversity in arts and letters. But it also feeds the native selfishness of mankind, which is often the catalyst for vice, crime, violence, and mayhem. A society without restraints against immorality is chaotic and bent toward anarchy. The legendary wise man Solomon wrote, "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; but happy is he who keeps the law" (Proverbs 29:18). Of individuals, he said, "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls," that is, "without defense" (Proverbs 25:28).

Somehow, people must be persuaded to see and practice the Christian ideal of altruism. Jesus said to His disciples, "Whosoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave---just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:27-28). Dominated by this teaching, the disciple Paul said, "We then who are strong ought to bear with the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me'" (Romans 15:1-3). And Paul followed his own admonition, when he told Christians at Philippi, "Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all" (Philippians 2:17). To the Corinthians, he said, "I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls" (2 Corinthians 12:15). Is this radical joy of service, which is exalted by Paul, only ephemeral or is it real? We can only know by denying ourselves and

servicing others in a true spirit of Christian altruism.

A frequent partner of populist individualism is indulgence. Gratification of the desires of our flesh is so tempting that we will often seek out teachers who will satisfy the self-indulgent "itch" in our ears, as Paul says in 2 Timothy 4:3, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers." Yet, Jesus was an amazing model of self-control. No moral scandal ever tarnished Him. He resisted every temptation to gratify the flesh. After hungering for 40 days, the temptation to use His divine power to make stones into bread would not move him to yield. It only led Him to answer, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4). Today, some people who are pretending to be followers of Christ have almost no self-control regarding temptations similar to this. The apostle Peter gave self-control a prominent place in his list of things to add to faith. He wrote, "But.... giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, etc." (2 Peter 1:5-6). The apostle Paul, who thought it was pertinent to preach to sinners in high places on "righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come" (Acts 24:25), applied the principle to himself with a vigor worthy of imitation. In a delightful allusion to the world of sports, he said, "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus; not with uncertainty. Thus I fight; not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:24-28).

A companion of indulgence is greed. Some pseudo-Christians are so greedy for wealth that they will sacrifice integrity, service to others, responsibility to family, maintenance of self-respect, and faithful loyalty to the church to gain it. Certainly, no person desiring the service of leadership in the church of God can be of that sort. Elders of the local churches are to be free of it (1 Timothy 3:3), and must be instrumental in silencing others who are not free (Titus 1:10-11).

But what of the so-called "common Christian" who is satisfied to occupy his pew complacently each Sunday (or rather, each convenient Sunday when the appeal of his idol of greed is momentarily quiescent)? Does he not have the same Reality Check to face? When a greedy man asked Jesus to use his moral authority to command his brother to share an inheritance, He answered, "Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?" Then to His disciples, He said, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" (Luke 12:13-15). He follows this with the tale of the greedy and selfish rich man who died at the moment he was making plans for even greater self-indulgence. Jesus marks him as a fool, and says, "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21).

In his apostolic counsel to Timothy, Paul preached contentment by saying, "Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness" (1 Timothy 6:6-11). The impregnable vaults of heaven preserve the real treasures deposited by the Christian who has acquired the ability to distinguish between false and true riches, between unreal and real wealth.

Of course, it is feasible that, with good fortune, and the wise use of investments, a Christian who knows these distinctions, and instils them in his heart, can become fabulously wealthy in this world's goods. But, if he never loses sight of what is "real," he, with all others who do not "trust in uncertain riches but in the living God," can be "rich in good works---ready to distribute, willing to share," and will succeed in "storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on the life which is life indeed" (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Contentment is the key. Paul had it, and said, "I have learned in whatever state I am to be content" (Philippians 4:11). However, in these "reality checks" for disciples of Christ, there is no way for the reality of these commands to have dominating force in their lives, unless they fully recognize absolute reality in the wisdom revealed in the Word of God! They must acknowledge that it is the "in-corruptible seed" which enlivens us by its inherent liveliness and eternal endurance (1 Peter 1:22-25).

"Looking out for No. 1" is therefore the epitome of "conventional wisdom," but it is utterly opposed to the Spirit of Christ. The man who claims to have "taken up the cross of Jesus," then selfishly pursues his own agenda, is either a grand liar, or has never come close enough to Christ to learn this very basic Christian ethic.

## Chapter Three

### Number 1 on the Lookout

While "Conventional Wisdom Christians" are "looking out for No. 1," it is also tempting for them to be "on the lookout" for ways to rise above others. They do not always realize at first the multitude of ways that they can indulge themselves in such selfish pursuits, but they learn quickly. Teachers of Conventional Wisdom offer many justifications for their actions, based on what they call "practical experience." The God who created us marks out a much different trail for us to follow, but one of which many are unfamiliar because of a lack of Bible study. Even if we are familiar with God's revealed precepts, we may ignore or deviate from the path of God, judging it to be "impractical" in modern society.

Jesus even had to disabuse His disciples regarding their presumptions about "upward mobilism." He said to them, "You know that they who are accounted to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you: but whosoever would become great among you, shall be your minister; and whosoever would be first among you, shall be servant of all. For the Son of man also came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45).

There are many examples of ambitious selfishness practiced by less-than-perfect "Christians." Their schemes and intrigues incubate and hatch some derivative applications, which also need to be exposed to "reality checks."

The devastating vice of pride claims many through the application of Conventional Wisdom. It is said by many of its advocates that a person must believe in himself, in order to "rise above the herd," in order to "get ahead," in order to maintain "self-esteem." Humility is not considered a virtue, but is ridiculed as weak, cowardly, and degrading. However, in opposition to pride, which claims so many souls, the Bible repeatedly ordains "HUMILITY!" Pride is rebuked only mildly in some Bible passages like Proverbs 11:2, "When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom." (Compare Proverbs 13:10). The Christian indulging in pride may view such verses as merely philosophical, to be weighed in the balance against Conventional Wisdom, but Solomon later comes on stronger, when he says, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the plunder with the proud" (Proverbs 16:18).

Is personal destruction truly at the end of the road of pride, or is Solomon simply trying to create a "bogeyman" to scare those who practice it? He advises that humil-ity is better than sharing the plunder of the proud. But what "plunder," if any, is offered to the humble. Should not the humble have incentives, as well as the proud? Solomon says, "Certainly!" He offers the inestimable virtue of "honor" in Proverbs 29:23, where he writes, "A man's pride shall bring him low; But he that is of a lowly spirit shall obtain honor." But to the grand prize of honor he also adds "riches" and "life" in 22:4, saying,

"The reward of humility and the fear of Jehovah Is riches, and honor, and life." The type of "riches," and the kind of "life," are not defined, but the strong implication is that they refer to spiritual riches and life, which are more "real" than silver and indulgence. Compare the example of Moses, recorded in Hebrews 11:24-26. He chose "rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he looked to the reward."

Jesus once attended a supper, and observing the way guests sought the customary places of honor, He said, "When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honorable than you be invited by him; and he who invited you and him come and say to you, 'Give place to this man,' and then you begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes he may say to you, 'Friend, go up higher.' Then you will have glory in the presence of those who sit at the table with you. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:8-11). Solomon previously had written, "The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, and a man is valued by what others say of him" (Proverbs 27:21).

Now it is possible that some proud person reading the admonitions of Jesus and Solomon, might say within himself, "I can take this advice, and sit low at the table, because my prestige is so great that I certainly will be asked to 'go up higher,' and the accolades that follow will feed my pride even more." The problem with this reasoning is that many who nourish their pride really have little reason to be proud. Their pride has no substance. If they indulged themselves in this sort of feigned humility, might discover that their self-delusions would be exposed.

Gideon, the great judge of Israel, lost none of his prestige when he magnified his virtuous humility by flattering some haughty swaggering Ephraimites. The story is captivating to the minds of those who truly wish to follow his example. When God had called him to lead Israel against the Midianites, he humbly begged to be excused, but was persuaded to submit himself to the command of God, and even allowed his original force of 32,000 men to be drastically reduced to only three hundred faithful followers. After he had routed the enormous enemy army, and was pursuing the survivors with an enlarged force from the tribes of Naphtali, Asher and Manasseh, he called for the Ephraimites in the high country to seize the fords of the River Jordan, in order to hinder the crossing of the retreating remnant of the Midianites.

After the men of Ephraim successfully defended some of the fords, and had killed two of the Midianite princes, they brought their severed heads to Gideon as trophies of their success. The two forces met, and immediately the swaggering Ephraimites angrily rebuked Gideon for not calling them at the first to be a part of his original army. The humble Gideon proved to be a skilled diplomat, and answered in a way that showed he was unconcerned about the maintenance of his own reputation. To quiet the rebukes of

his accusers, he replied, "What have I done now in comparison with you?... God has delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb, and what was I able to do in comparison with you?" This humble diplomacy cooled the anger of the Ephraimites, and avoided strife within his army, but who now remembers the paltry deed of valor the proud boasting Ephraimites accomplished, in comparison to the overwhelming success of humble Gideon. In nearly every sermon and Bible lesson on this event, the exalted victory of the humble Gideon so overshadows the little skirmish of the haughty Ephraim-ites who rebuked him that it is not even mentioned in passing. (See Judges 6:1-8:3.)

A subtle spinoff of pride is complacency. The pride of the Pharisees, so often condemned by the humble Jesus, manifested itself in this attitude. They "trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." This prompted Jesus to speak a timely parable about the complacency that is generated by pride. He said, "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a Publican (that is, a Jew despised because he had voluntarily become a tax collector for the oppressive Roman government, for profit). The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this Publican. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner.' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:9-14).

When pride reigns, complacency regarding our standing with God becomes proportionately distorted. In effect, we have examined ourselves, and have decided that we are better than others, perhaps the best. The apostle Paul warns about this attitude, when he said of himself, "...I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God" (1 Corinthians 4:4-5).

The same apostle arrayed examples of the failures of some of the children of Israel, after they had been delivered from Egypt, and after "all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea," warning us, "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:1-12).

Another spinoff of pride is the spirit which causes a person to become a critic. The Reality Check for this attitude is found in divine commands to practice self-criticism. Inspired Scripture tells us that a reversal of the spirit of criticism can be accomplished by this method. Paul endured severe criticism of himself from some in the church at Corinth, and says in his reply, "I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest there be

contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults; lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced... I have told you before, and foretell as if I were present the second time, and now being absent I write to those who have sinned before, and to all the rest, that if I come again I will not spare. since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you." Then he offers the alternative by which they could avoid his threatened reproof in the name of Christ; "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves" (2 Corinthians 13:2-5). Jesus' original instruction for this was spoken in the Sermon on the Mount. He said, "How can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye;' and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:4-5).

Instead of self-criticism, however, many Christians nurture the proud assumption that they were put on this earth to criticize the behavior of lesser mortals. Feeling that they are above reproof, they often "prove" the faith of others, using their own well-developed opinions as the measuring rod. This opinion-shrouded faith is dogmatic, imitating the tactics of the medieval inquisitor, ferreting out heresy, instead of helping others to conform to "the Faith once for all delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). This is manifested in a number of ways.

It is found in the criticism of those whose views, on things that have no spiritual consequences, are different from our own (see Romans 14:1-19). At the end of this discourse, Paul concludes, "Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way... let us pursue the things which make for peace and things by which one may edify another."

It is also found in the efforts of some to build a partisan following around their perverse doctrines, as Paul predicted to the Elders of the church at Ephesus in Acts 20:29-30. He said, "I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them."

And, it is found in those who generate strife in the church rather than being "peacemakers." According to Paul, leaders in the church must lend their efforts to a search for peace. He admonishes them to "Avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:23-26). Seldom does this passage influence the way leaders of modern congregations settle matters of strife.

Finally, it is found in the desire to have dominion over others in the church, as

Diotrephes did in 3 John 9-11. The Apostle said, "I wrote somewhat unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will bring to remembrance his works which he does, prating against us with wicked words: and not content therewith, neither does he himself receive the brethren, and them that would he forbids and casts them out of the church. Beloved, do not imitate that which is evil, but that which is good. He that does good is of God: he that does evil has not seen God."

We all value our own opinions. Let's face it, we've spent years developing them, and it seems unworthy to keep such valuable stuff to ourselves, right? But there is a danger in making our own opinions the standard by which all men are to be judged. Who do we think we are, anyway? "Contending for THE faith," as Jude says, is far more profitable for others than contention and condemnation of others over our own opinionated version of that faith. No person is truly won to the Lord except by the word of God. Jesus said, "No man can come to me, except the Father that sent me draw him: and I will raise him up in the last day." But then He explained how the Father "draws" us. He said, "It is written in the prophets, And they shall all be taught of God. Every one that has heard from the Father, and has learned, cometh unto me" (John 6:44-45). The word of Christians who have presumed to package the faith of Christ inside the envelope of their human opinion is not the standard of judgment. Jesus said, "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him; the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day" (John 12:48).

So, neither "looking out for No. 1," nor being "No. 1 on the lookout," is pleasing to God. Humility is God's Reality Check.

## Chapter Four

### The Feelgood Generation

In every period of the history of mankind, it can be supposed that the "pleasures of sin" have had a very strong appeal. It is certain that sins of many kinds are pleasurable. This is especially true of sexual sins. It is no wonder then that the person who is determined to seek self-gratification as a primary goal is very frequently drawn into sexual activity. Living as we do in an age marked by extreme selfishness, and observing the current emphasis on sexual hedonism, we see that most appeals for restraint go unheeded, even among those calling themselves Christians. These appeals are buried under an avalanche of contrary advice coming from every form of media available to us in the "Information Age," from pulp magazines to the "world-wide-web." The writers of such things advise, "Do what feels good!" They have succeeded in convincing many, because every selfish person wants to do what feels good. So, the "Age of Feelgood" is upon us.

The person who loves food and seriously overeats is often repaid for his folly with ill health, heart attacks, intestinal and organic disorders, and such like. In spite of these consequences, the person who over-indulges on food is often deaf to pleas for moderation by loved ones who see the ruin coming on. So it is also with the person who indulges the appetite to commit sexual sin. He or she ignores all warnings regarding the spiritual, and even physical consequences of sexual perversity, being enticed by the sensual pleasure of such sins. This societal problem is most evident in some areas of Africa, where the AIDS crisis is overwhelming the voices calling for self-control. Progress in the fight against its spread is almost nil, because age-old customs of promiscuous sex prevail. Poor Africans cannot afford many alternate activities which might give pleasure, and distract them from the constant temptations of sex, so they resent any suggestion that they curtail their free access to sexual pleasure, even though it is destined to kill an extremely large proportion of them. Concerned officials and doctors are slowly realizing that the key to controlling the spread of AIDS is not moderation, or even "protection," it is abstention. Yet, in Western industrialized nations abstention is seldom advised (even though alternate pleasures abound and are affordable). We have not progressed beyond the "protection" phase of prevention, because of the prevalence of the doctrine of sexual hedonism.

The plea of the Lord to those tempted to be sexual sinners is not "be moderate," or "protect yourself," it is "Abstain!" Yes, He calls for moderation in many things, but not in this. God's purpose in calling for abstention is not the prevention of the spread of AIDS, since this fatal physical consequence of promiscuous sex has been around only a few years, but He desires to prevent a greater problem: our spiritual death and its eternal consequences. Consider this comparison. The eating of food is a necessary function of a living organism (only complicated by inordinate or inappropriate appetite), and abstinence from food beyond a certain point brings physical death. Many people are alarmed at learning that a friend has fallen victim to the self-imposed phobia called

anorexia, the fear of eating too much. Some years ago, in a well-publicized case, Karen Carpenter tragically cut short a magnificent career as a popular singer by deliberately starving herself to death. Yet, in the case of sexual sin, the charge from heaven, proclaimed by the Apostle Peter, is "...abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul" (1 Peter 2:11b). This sort of abstinence is for the prevention of spiritual death resulting from sin...it does not cause death, as anorexia does. The desire for sexual intercourse is an appetite that can be denied completely without any serious physical consequence, yet with great spiritual benefit.

It is interesting that Peter's plea in this verse is prefaced with the statement, "Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims..." Christians have a future destination toward which they are to travel without being distracted by turns to the right or to the left. They are primarily sojourners, temporary dwellers on the earth, purposed by God to serve Him during the relatively short period of their lives. As pilgrims, they journey toward the Day of Judgment, when Jesus will give them as an inheritance "a kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). It is "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven" for them (1 Peter 1:4). Abstinence from illicit sex is a small price to pay in exchange for such a rich and enduring reward!

Abstinence is taught by Jesus on the principle that we owe the Lord dedicated service and exclusive devotion. In that portion of scripture in which He revealed His strict New Testament rule on marriage and divorce, His disciples were dismayed, and said, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry" (Matthew 19:10). In a challenge to them to be governed by a higher priority, Jesus said that "there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men," but that there are also "eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake..." (Matthew 19:12). This is a lesson hard to learn, unless we are aware of the transitory "pilgrim" nature of our earthly sojourn.

People who are not impressed by appeals to practice this sort of sexual restraint fall easy victim to Conventional Wisdom. They are easily persuaded by it, because self-control has never been a part of their education, only self-indulgence. When they begin experiencing the pleasure of sexual mischief, then proceed to pre-marital sexual intercourse, they finally justify their licentiousness by applauding the persuasive arguments of intellectuals who profess to see nothing wrong in any kind of sex. Pragmatists preach the principle, "Do what feels good! Don't be bothered by the obsolete guilt complexes of Puritan America." What the victim of this Conventional Wisdom fails to see is that such advice comes from people just like himself who also have never learned self-control, who have also experienced the pleasure of sexual mischief, and have used their subjective opinions to justify their own licentiousness. The advice therefore comes from those who have no desire to serve God, or who think they can serve God acceptably by applying their own personal standard rather than by

His.

The notion also prevails among many self-proclaimed Christians that the adulterer or adultress has not really done anything so terrible. "Look at the sound reasons why they were tempted to abandon their vows of sexual faithfulness to their spouses," they say. Sex in their marriage was becoming routine, and unsatisfactory (their native selfishness prevented them from seeing the benefit in selflessly trying to correct this situation). The problem is that each party brought an individualized agenda into the marriage, and maintained it in the face of a need for cooperation. Consequently, stress had grown through the years. So, the normal outlet for sexual desire is abandoned, because the spouse has become a competitor rather than a partner. This competition for individual rights then generates a presumed need for more "breathing room." Needing an outlet, and having abandoned God's formula for sexual release, they seek another partner. These and many other such excuses may also be intensified in the mind of the adulterer by the "attractiveness" of that newfound partner in sex. After they have destroyed their sanctified marriage, their lame plea is, "Isn't a person entitled to sexual satisfaction, and pleasure?"

"Yes," God says in answer, but he stipulates that it must be with that spouse to whom you pledged your faithfulness. He counselled Israel, through the prophet Malachi, "...Jehovah hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously, though she is thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant.....He sought a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth" (Malachi 2:14-15). To the people of this age, he commands through the Apostle Paul, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman. But, because of fornications, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband" (1 Corinthians 7:1-2).

In the frantic search for self-gratification, however, ignored are the potential heartaches initiated by broken vows, sundered families, abandoned and dismayed children, and all the other fruits of such selfish sin.

The scenario of the broken home and disillusioned children need not ever be played out, if the husband and wife understand and apply the biblical principles of love. Christian love is altruistic. It seeks the gratification of others. The husband who loves his wife, as God teaches him, will never give his wife cause to look for sexual satisfaction in another man's arms. He will treat her body as if it is his own, "nourishing and cherishing" it (Ephesians 5:28-29). He will "dwell with his wife according to knowledge, giving honor to the woman, as unto the weaker vessel" (1 Peter 3:7). He will be "tenderly affectionate" toward her, a characteristic of love taught in the Scripture (Romans 12:10), along with being "patient, kind, without envy, humble, and unprovoked" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Need we say that the Christian wife has similar obligations to her husband?

In an atmosphere of such love, sex is extremely satisfying for both husband and wife. The Apostle Paul, though unmarried, was guided by the Spirit of God to say to married

Christians, "Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (1 Corinthians 7:3-5).

Marital unfaithfulness is epidemic today, but the notion also prevails that it is foolish to wait till marriage to enjoy the luxurious pleasure of sex. In answer to those who admonish restraint, reinforcing their appeals by the authority of inspired Scripture, the indulgent hedonist brands their words as personal opinions, and clings to his own, answering, "When my sensual urges are stimulated by intimate bodily contact, and begin to flow voluptuously through my body, exciting and enticing me to succumb to the pleasure of pre-marital sex, it is foolish to resist! And besides, it really feels good!" Then, if the hedonist is honest, he may add, "It feels even better, if I can suppress all feeling of guilt, and can also forget the social, spiritual, and even medical consequences of the act." His descent into this chasm of immorality may have its beginning with the profane choice of abandoning virginity to a very sexy and willing lover. The choice is profane, especially for those who are Christians, because in doing this they claim the right to possess and use that which actually belongs to the Lord, their bodies, and have "joined them to a harlot." The word of the inspired Apostle Paul is, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For 'the two,' He says, 'shall become one flesh.' But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him. Flee sexual immorality" (1 Corin-thians 6:15-17).

The "liberated" woman, when she glibly and casually surrenders her virginity to the gratification of her flesh, profanes that which is treated by God as a treasure to be guarded and reserved till marriage, so that the husband may be confident that he has taken a bride who has not been immoral. This is not a prudish Victorian concept, or even Puritanical in origin, it is biblical. Under the Law of Moses, a man had the right expect that his bride would be a virgin. After the wedding night, if he suspected that she was not, he had the right to defame her publicly. However, she also had the right to defend herself against the charge, if it was false. The parents responsible for her righteous upbringing could display the bedclothes of the marriage bed stained with the blood of her torn hymen. The husband would be duly chastised and fined for his false accusation, and could never put her away in divorce. However, if this "token of virginity" was not found, then the community executed a penalty of death on the woman (Deuteronomy 22:13-21).

The potential husband of Old Testament times was not free from sexual restraint. He claimed the right to a wife who entered the marriage as a virgin, because he himself had submitted himself to strict rules of sexual behavior. If he had kept himself in a state of

virginity, because of these prohibitions, he had every right to claim a daughter of Israel who had honored the same laws. The Priests of Moses' time were forbidden to marry a woman who was a harlot, that is, one who had engaged in premarital sex. They were also forbidden to marry a divorced woman. A devout widow was acceptable as a wife. The High Priest, however, could marry only a virgin. (Leviticus 21:13-15.)

This exaltation of virginity is evident also in the New Testament. Christ was born of a virgin, according to prophecy (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:18-23). In figures which extol the purity of the church, virginity is a sign of that purity. Paul told the Corinthian church, "For I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy: for I espoused you to one husband, that I might present you as a pure virgin to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2). And, in Ephesians 5:22-33, a passage that is applicable both to temporal marriage, and the relationship of the church to Christ, Paul tells us, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it; that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish."

Virginity might even be called "sacred," in light of these truths. It is certainly more precious in the sight of God than in the eyes of modern hedonists. Under biblical authority, the promiscuous woman, or man, is not desirable as a marriage partner. There were, of course, some exceptions. The woman who was forced into sex by a man was not charged with promiscuity or "harlotry," but only if the circumstances prevented her from being rescued from the rapist (see Deuteronomy 22:23-27). The severe judgment of God on those who favor casual sex shows His desire to keep his creatures from sexual "defilement." Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, who was raped by a Canaanite prince, was so defiled. It did not matter to the brothers of the girl that the rapist wanted to marry her. They said she had been defiled, and that he had treated her shamefully, as if she was a harlot. Because of his audacity in violating moral precepts, the prince, and many of his subjects learned a hard lesson at the hands of these vengeful brothers (see Genesis 34).

These examples of God's treatment of heterosexual perversions do not touch on another "abomination." And though "it is shame to speak" of things which were done secretly in the "darkness" of spiritual rebellion in the early days of Christianity (Ephesians 5:11-12), we must acknowledge that some people today "feel" that they should be counted as bona fide Christians while following the homosexual and lesbian lifestyles. Their public, brash, demonstrative pressures on society and the churches for recognition and approval of their deviate behavior ignores all the scriptural condemnations against it, both in the Old and New Testaments.

We will refrain from speaking also of the disgusting practices that even go beyond these things, because it is time for the consideration of Reality Checks. To the fornicators and adulterers, the Word proclaims "Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed (of marriage) undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Hebrews 13:4) To

the so-called "gay community," and practitioners of perverse sex beyond, the same divine Word says "...the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites... will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and compare the historical background of homosexuality revealed in Romans 1:24-32, which tells us that their perversion results from "refusing to have God in their knowledge," and that "they that practice such things are worthy of death"). God even tries to persuade us that unrestrained sexual lust is a self-inflicted evil, by saying, "Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body, Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

But these very specific condemnations carry the full force of Reality Checks only if they are believed by the reader to be inspired of God. The problem that exists in many churches today is that the Bible is treated as a collection of fantasies, myths, and fables, containing many fatuous pieces of advice that ooze through the cracks in between them. "Now hold on!" you may say, "If this is so, why do churches exist at all, having only roots that are bedded in such a useless volume of literature?" The answer, in the judgment of many, is that many churches (guided by skeptic seminarians parading as "pastors") find enough acceptable material on moral philosophy, gleaned and separated from the useless parts of the Bible, on which to build a tenuous religious system, and are satisfied with this nucleus. By a careful sifting process, they think, the essential wisdom of the ancients (or, of God) is discoverable in all that mass of untruth and superstition and bigoted opinion called the Bible.

These distilled miniscule germs of "truth" form the basis of modern religious dogma, and to the delight of many self-serving people, often show agreement with the humanistic precepts of Conventional Wisdom. This is all that makes them acceptable and applicable to human behavior. All the rest of the Bible's mythical "drivel" is discarded. A sizeable part of this discarded refuse contains the offensive list of condemnations of sexual behavior. Modern liberal interpreters question their verity, and plead, pathetically, "Surely God did not intend to forbid His creatures to indulge in the satisfying pleasures of such engagements, after implanting the yearning for that pleasure within them." The anathemas in the Bible against adultery, fornication, homosexuality, and other more sordid sexual practices, are considered only spurious insertions written by prudes, eunuchs, and sexual cripples who were jealous of the freedom and pleasure enjoyed by more virile specimens of mankind.

Some social and medical evils that issue from sexual promiscuity are alarming to sociologists, physicians, and even politicians, but the solutions that are offered do not reflect, or even come close, to God's. To ease the hurt felt by families victimized by adultery, the sociologist offers only the philosophy of adjustment and stoic acceptance. To the onslaught of venereal disease and AIDS, the physician only offers hopeful

research for future "cures" that will permit promiscuity and perversity to continue without any serious medical consequences. To ease the panic of a public concerned about the breakdown of the family unit, and the moral degeneration of society, adulterous and promiscuous and even "gay" politicians only proclaim sympathy, make conciliatory speeches, and usually end up offering nothing substantive in the way of a remedy.

Against all this, we read that God created Adam and Eve, man and woman, and ordained in their relationship the divine precedents of heterosexuality, mono-gamy, and marital loyalty (Genesis 2:18-24). It is within this relationship that God allows the legitimate right (and pleasure) of sexual intercourse. Marriage is God's institution for the prevention of unlawful fornication (1 Corinthians 7:1-5). He describes homosexuality, promiscuity, and perversion, as "abominations," a word that expresses "abhorrence" and "disgust" (Leviticus 18:22; Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Proverbs 11:20; and compare Proverbs 7:1-27). He calls these evils "works of the flesh" that deny inheritance in the eternal Kingdom (Galatians 5:19), and tells us in a previous verse, "For the flesh lusts against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish." Now, most people who freely gratify every sexual desire think they are doing the things they wish to do, but they are wishing for the wrong things. If they claim to be Christians, they should be wishing to do the will of God. God says to us through the apostle Paul, "...You received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 4:1b-8).

Did you read this passage carefully, weighing each word and phrase? In one short statement, Paul virtually answers all the modern critics who reject the Bible's condemnations of sexual sins by showing that the message is from God, who claims a creator's right to command his creatures. It is not from Paul, or any other man, and therefore cannot be rejected. He shows that unholy sexual immorality is incompatible with serving the consistently holy and moral God revealed in Scripture. He shows that such sinful behavior joins the "Christian" practitioner more with the Pagan godlessness of the Gentile world. And he shows that these commands issue from the "Lord Jesus," who died for us, a fact that makes us spiritual debtors to obey Him. The dedicated Christian takes these words to heart, but the pseudo-Christian only wears the name of Christ, and does not submit to Him.

We could perhaps follow the custom of many of the "Christian" marriage counselors,

who (without first trying to probe the extent of their client's commitment to God) extol the vivacious joy to be found in marriage, emphasize the gratification of keeping the marriage vow of faithfulness, and romance the honor of loving a mate as God has loved us. We could also describe and express despair over the manifold heartaches of divorce and unfaithfulness and promiscuity. But the core of the matter is that God has set forth a spiritual agenda to which He commands us to conform, in order to "please" Him. His implications are extensive. Through His immutable teaching, he implies that a person can and should love, and be faithful even to a spouse who has grown old, ugly, infirm, and cranky. Has He not loved us, even when we were undeserving sinners? (See Romans 5:8). This, and many other precepts are the Reality Checks for the immorality resulting from a preference for Conventional Wisdom. It is not the purpose of this essay to review and explain all that the Word of God teaches about sexual behavior, but simply to urge Christians to face the "real" need to understand and obey its precepts. Where is the selfless Christian believer who will face reality and conform to the will of God? He can transform his own life, and this choice, universally connecting him with all those who have made the same choice, may also alter and heal our immoral society as well.

## Chapter Five

### The Age of Tolerance

Many modern Christians are victimized by the evolutionary process that has created a climate of toleration for the shameful scandal of sectarian religious chaos. The diverse multiplication of cults, dogmatic systems, and denominations only gets worse as time passes, partly because each generation has been progressively taught to be more tolerant than the previous one. Today, it is counted scandalous if we do not tolerate all these deviant religious practices to the point of tacit approval.

This modern condition is understandable, when viewed against the background of intolerance displayed by religious tyrants in the Dark Ages, in medieval times, and even during the Protestant Reformation. During those ages, those who were branded heretics were imprisoned, tortured, drowned, put to the sword, burned at the stake, drawn and quartered, and subjected to other vicious means of punishment devised in the perverse minds of mankind. Hundreds of thousands of lives were sacrificed to the cause of maintaining a religious status quo.

When the Protestant Reformation began in the 16th Century, the territorial rivalries of the Protestants and Catholics led to religious wars made infamous by ruthless massacres, mass deportations, and executions without trial. Ulrich Zwingli, the great Swiss reformer, labored valiantly to free the Swiss soldiery from being made mercenary instruments in these religious wars, especially in the army of the Pope, but was willing to use these same soldiers to fight wars against Roman Catholic cantons in Switzerland, in order to put an end to the practice. However, when the Anabaptists extended his reformation views beyond his intent, he eventually began to believe in religious coercion, though not to the degree of his Catholic enemies. There followed scourgings, imprisonments, and drownings by the civil authorities in Zurich against presumed heretics. Though disapproving of the severity of the civil magistrates, Zwingli conceded that desperate times required desperate measures. When Zwingli was killed in a battle with Catholic forces, he was so hated by his victorious enemies that his body was tied to horses, and literally ripped apart as an example of the infamy of becoming a Protestant. To compound the problem, the Protestant Reformation, victoriously independent of the Pope, with its sense of freedom from ecclesiastic authority, became a new hothouse for breeding more independency, and incubated many new sects which sprang up in the areas influenced by the great reformers, Luther, Zwingli, and later, Calvin. These Protestant Reformers, who previously had begged the Catholics for the freedom to go their own way, were now appalled when they saw the disunity instigated by the multiplication of sects. The tradition of intolerant religious coercion, learned from Catholicism, was retained in the growing verbal strife of Protestant sectarianism, causing many a sincere soul to suffer martyrdom.

The famous Plymouth Pilgrims, with their desire to break away from the Church of England, were forced to seek isolation from church authorities, escaping persecution

first in Holland, then later by coming to the shore of Massachusetts. After a firm hold was gained in the New World, however, these "Separatists," who fled intolerance in England, exercised it against those they branded as heretics in America! Though they were less severe than Catholics in their punishments, the stocks, the lash, the prison, the dunking chair, and other means of corporal punishment were used to impose their beliefs on others.

Growing aversion to religious intolerance caused the leaders of the emerging United States to take an unprecedented step, the prohibition against the establishment of a "State Church." Gradually, the states of the new Union which had recognized State Churches severed their connections from them, and the age of tolerance began. Physical violence over religious differences gradually waned in this country, under a combination of constitutional litigations and the onslaught of toleration propaganda, until it has now become an abomination even to say anything critical of another person's religious views. Tolerance comes full circle when it evolves to the point that the mildest of critics of the religious views of others are severely and intolerantly criticized by the ultra-tolerants, a ludicrous evolution, to say the least.

So, today, many Christians refuse to speak against false doctrines and false teachers, being afraid of the backlash of rebuke constantly flaring from the ranks of the avant garde of toleration." It has been said millions of times in the hearing of Christians, "Don't argue about religion or politics." These taboos are the product of the Age of Tolerance.

Another offspring of this age is seen in the rise of such organizations as "The National Conference of Christians and Jews," and similar groups connecting men of diverse views in Protestant and Catholic sects. There are even those which associate Muslims, or Buddhists or Hindus together with Christian-oriented groups.

In some circles, it has become extremely unfashionable to deny the existence of true spirituality, and the presence of spiritual benefit, in non-Christian religions. Yet, the ultimate test of the spiritual validity of these groups should be made by comparison to the spirituality taught in the Word of God, the Bible. In it, we are told that Christians, through the "exceedingly great and precious promises" of God, may become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Only in this transformation is true spirituality to be found. This is accomplished by being "renewed in the spirit of our minds," and "putting on the new man, that after God hath been created in righteousness and holiness of truth" (Ephesians 4:23-24). The Gentiles of New Testament times sought spirituality in a multitude of superstitious cults and mystical religions, but Paul saw no spiritual value in any of them, and classified all people involved in them as "having no hope and without God in the world," because they were "separate from Christ" and "strangers from the covenants of promise" (Ephesians 2:11-12). To inquisitive Athenians surrounded by a plethora of altars to strange Gods, Paul said, "The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commands men that they should all everywhere repent: inasmuch as he has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in

righteousness by the man whom he has ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he has raised him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31). The Christian, therefore, is prompted by these truths to be intolerant of departures from the truth, because he recognizes the intolerant nature of Christianity!

Yes, Christianity is intolerant, because God is intolerant. His basic original command to Israel, spoken through the terrifying smoke and fire of Mt. Sinai, was, "You shall have no other gods before Me." He followed that with prohibitions against bowing to and serving graven images of any creature, and said, "For I Jehovah your God am a jealous God..." (Exodus 20:3-5). The Children of Israel were slow learners, however. Less than two months later some restless souls among them had grown so despondent about the return of Moses from atop Mt. Sinai (where he had gone by their request to receive the laws of God), that they made a golden calf, and proclaimed a feast to Jehovah in honor of it. God was so angry that He was willing to destroy all Israel, because of this rapid and sensual defection, but Moses reminded Him of the loss of reputation He would suffer by such an act, and God relented (Exodus 32:1-14).

From that day, God and Israel began a millenia-long conflict regarding idolatry. He claimed by abundant evidence to be the only God (Deuteronomy 4:32-35), and He refused to allow the worship of any deity imagined and invented by men (Deuteronomy 6:13-15). He sent prophets to denounce their idolatry, and predicted dire consequences if they continued in it (Jeremiah 32:26-35, 30:12-15; 2 Chronicles 36:14-16).

God showed extreme patience, mercy, and even tolerance toward the nation of Israel. But finally, at the end of the millenium, His patience wore thin and He punished the idolaters. In captivity in Babylon for seventy years, all that generation of idolaters perished, and those who survived then yearned for the "Old Paths." God heard their supplications, and restored them to the land of their impenitent fathers, never more to practice idolatry. Four hundred years of faithfulness followed, until Jesus came and called them to seek God through Himself. At that time, however, the old stiffnecked attitude revived in many of them, and they rejected Jesus as the Christ, in spite of all the undeniable evidences to support His claim.

So, God turned to the Gentiles to seek a "people for His own possession." Paul rebuked the perceptive errors of the Athenians about God, and showed them that His tolerance of pagan idolatry was at an end (Acts 17:24-31). The Jews, on the other hand, now purged from the practice of worshipping false gods, were to be punished for rejecting their Messiah, Jesus, the chosen one of God. In Romans 9:22-10:4, the Apostle Paul justifies the measures taken by God against those who rejected Jesus, but leaves the door of repentance open for them in Romans 11:25-32. Seldom will one find a modern Jew who has forsaken his fleshly heritage to become a Christian, but until Jews of today are willing to employ the grace of God, and salvation in Christ, they must stubbornly linger in their state of unbelief, and be condemned.

Jesus gave the Jews the first ultimatum, when he said to them, "You will die in your

sins; for if you do not believe that I am He (that is, the Christ), you will die in your sins" (John 8:24). Later, He commanded His disciples to "Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16).

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). None of the writers of the New Testament moderate this narrow statement. They do not suggest, or even hint of alternative routes to God. They began their work by saying that Jesus was the proverbial "stone which was rejected... which has become the chief cornerstone," and continued by saying, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:11-12). Jesus had previously proclaimed this truth, by saying to intransigent Jews, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: `The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD'S doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes'? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder" (Matthew 21:42-44). To set this truth in concrete, the Apostle Paul wrote, "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time" (1 Timothy 2:5-6, and compare Philippians 2:9-11, which says of Christ, "Wherefore also God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Therefore, the Bible being true, and the exclusive guide for the Christian, there can be no tolerance for any human being who will not recognize Jehovah as the only God, and confess only Jesus as the Christ, the savior of all mankind. This includes Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and anti-Christian cults of all kinds. The tolerant voices of Conventional Wisdom say, however, "It is arrogant, or disgraceful, or uncharitable, or ludicrous, or bigoted, or vicious (or any number of other slanderous descriptions), for a Christian to say that his religion is better than others." But Conventional Wisdom must not direct the faith of the true Christian. He faces the obligation to be checked by reality, by the truth of the inspired Word of God.

This is not to say that the Christian must practice his intolerance (which reflects that of God) in a spirit of violence or coercion against unbelievers. There is also a Reality Check raised in his Bible against such an attitude. He must follow such rules as Galatians 6:10, which reads, "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith." He must heed the instruction of the Apostle Peter, who counsels the Christian to use his moral conduct and submission to civil authority as the means to influence the unbelieving world (1 Peter 2:11-17, 3:13-16). Paul urges the same thing (Titus 2:1-8; Philippians 2:12-16; Romans 12:17-20; etc.). If there is any vengeance to be exercised on unbelievers, God and Christ will do it (Romans 12:19, 2

Thessalonians 1:7-9).

Beyond this, there is the duty of the Christian to practice his non-violent intolerance by refuting false teaching. In regard to the moral evil in the world, Paul commands us to walk as children of light, and to "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather even reprove them" (Ephesians 5:3-14). In regard to false religion, he commands us to "preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their desires, having itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Timothy 4:1-4).

The radical spirit of tolerance that pervades our age persuades many Christians (who should know better) to react to situations in unfitting ways. For example: suppose that a Christian's friend, who is a disciple of a false religious system, dies without having turned to the truth. Under the glare of the ultra-tolerants of this world, the Christian is expected to grant that his dead friend is in no spiritual peril because of his practice of false religion. Sincerity alone is said to be the key element and the only requirement in obtaining spiritual security. The truths revealed in the Bible are not to be considered exclusively true, they say, and the Christian is condemned as unloving, even hateful, if he expresses any doubt whatsoever as to the spiritual welfare of the dead friend. If the message of the Bible is to be believed as the inspired and immutable Word of God, however, the Christian cannot find any comfort merely in the sincerity of the dead. Sincerity must be tied to truth to be of any spiritual benefit at all.

The basic message of the Age of Tolerance is that Christianity is no more valid as a religious system than any of the other competitive religions of our world. The Christian has merely made a choice among many valid religious options. Faced by the claims in the Bible that Christ and Christianity are the only way to God and eternal life in heaven, the call for tolerance preached by the strident voices of Conventional Wisdom causes many to accept a watered-down version of Christianity, amended and gutted of its essential dogmas by liberal teachers, in order to make it compatible with other religions. The intolerant view that Christianity is the only valid religious system for mankind is branded by the disciples of the Age of Tolerance as "intolerable."

With this spirit of ultra-tolerance (which is often manifested by a spirit of intolerance toward those who do not agree with them) the leaders of Liberal Christianity are setting themselves up for a mighty shock. Muslim Fundamentalism is on the rise everywhere in the world. Historically, terror, war, and religious hatred abound where it has had influence. The reason? The Muslim Fundamentalist believes strongly in the exclusive validity of his religion, just as the Christian who is faithful to Bible Reality Checks does for his, and the two systems are in conflict for the minds of men. Both consider the other as heretical. The only difference between them is that the fundamentalist Muslim believes in the ultimate option of Jihad, "holy war" against those whom he considers heretics, and the true Christian does not. Unworthy representatives of medieval

Christianity, posing as "soldiers of the cross," may have once believed in "war against the infidel," mounting military Crusades against them, but there is no authorization for such physical religious coercion in the New Testament.

In spite of the disparity of these views, Christianity is not doomed to perish at the hand of the militants of Muslim Fundamentalism. God is on the throne in the affairs of men, and "vengeance belongs to Him." Christianity must meet the warlike militancy of Islam with its own militant peacemaking spirit. The Lord does not need our military might to bring false religion down. Even if the faithful unresisting Christian falls before the sword of Muslim intolerance, he has nothing to fear, for nothing can separate him from the Love of God in Christ Jesus. Paul asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (Romans 8:35). Then he answers his own question, by saying "I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Though tolerance is the cornerstone of liberal Christian thinking, the Christian touched by the force of Scripture cannot help but be a conservative, believing in the authenticity and complete authority of the Scriptures, and accepting every Reality Check offered in its divine pages against the Conventional Wisdom of liberalism. Intolerance of religious error is the Christian's basic motivation to "make disciples" of those within the fold of error, prompted by sincere love of every soul that will hear the truth, love it, and obey it. He cannot love the infidel, the Buddhist, the Muslim, the Jew, or the Hindu, or the cultist, apart from showing them the mercy of attempting to evangelize them, so that he can "snatch them out of the fire."

## Chapter Six

### THE CULTURE OF "SO WHAT"

The blush is gone from our modern society, just as it was abandoned by those who lived in the time of the Prophets of the Old Testament. Twice, when faced with the moral intransigence of His people, God utters His despair through Jeremiah, who was inspired to ask, "Were they ashamed because of the abomination they have done? They were not even ashamed at all; They did not even know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; At the time that I punish them, They shall be cast down, says the LORD" (Jeremiah 6:15, 8:12). In a later time, when Ezra the priest returned from Persian captivity to learn that those who had preceded him to their homeland had corrupted themselves, he cried, "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God; for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our guiltiness is grown up unto the heavens." (Ezra 9:6). He recalled that it was because of that sort of corruption that Israel was exiled in Babylon, and asked God in prayer, "After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us such deliverance as this, should we again break Your commandments, and join....with the people committing these abominations? Would You not be angry with us until You had consumed us, so that there would be no remnant or survivor?" (Ezra 9:13-14). After he prayed, he fell into a convulsion of weeping that goaded the collective conscience of those who observed it into repentance (Ezra 10:1-4).

Ezra's blush was effective, because there were some among the Israelites who "trembled at the commandment of God." Yet, we know that there are many who do not tremble before the message of God. They say, "So what," and continue in the corruptions and perversions condemned in the Word. The Apostle Peter has perfectly described "...them that walk after the flesh in the lust of defilement, and despise dominion. Daring, self-willed, they tremble not to rail at dignities" (2 Peter 2:10). We might suppose that these words were meant to identify people who had never known the way of the Lord, but the opposite is true. Further study of the context of Peter's statement reveals that these corrupters had infiltrated the church, and were spreading their filth among those who called themselves Christians. Peter says to his readers that they "....count it pleasure to revel in the day-time, spots and blemishes, revelling in their deceivings while they feast with you" (2 Peter 2:13). This connection is more clear in the remarks of Jude, who parallels what Peter said, but adds that these corrupters "have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 4). Is there anyone who denies that scandals are rampant among bodies of believers, today? There is actually a feeding frenzy in the media regarding the foibles and hypocrisies of religious people. Some of the most sordid of sins have been exposed,

involving people who were supposed to be trying to walk the high road of righteousness. But, the sad thing is that when they are confronted with the evidence of their misdeeds, these sinners often say, "So what!" and find support and encouragement from a host of followers who have developed that same sentiment through their example and teaching.

When men in high government office have been caught in a scandal of some variety, the answer that comes from their mouth almost immediately is, "I have done nothing wrong." We know, of course, that they often say this, because they suspect that the problem will have to be resolved legally, and they are trying to "plead innocent," in order to have a hearing before the bar of public opinion. If the evidence can be scrambled enough, or if witnesses can be discredited enough, they might be able to escape the legal consequences of their crimes. But, if the Christian proclaims his innocence in the face of evidence of his guilt, in the hope that his God will be confused by the same tactics, he is certainly fooling himself. The Word of God, which does not cause him to "tremble," says, "...There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13). This "reality check" for the Christian should show him that he needs to exclude himself from the "so what" culture of our time.

The "chip-on-the-shoulder" attitude of many sinners in our modern world is not new, as we have shown from both the Old and New Testament portions of the Word of God. Brazen resistance to the indictments of sin revealed in the Bible is one of the products of pride. People think it is humiliating to be influenced by straight preaching from the Word. Repentance is the most difficult of God's commands to obey, but it is absolutely necessary if we expect to enter the eternal kingdom. When Paul stood before the Sophists of Athens, and told them that "God....now commands all men everywhere to repent," he reinforced the need to take this command of God seriously, by saying, "because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31).

Like many today, some of the Athenian audience sneered at the idea of the resurrection of Christ. Even those who did not mock the concept did not readily believe, but only said, "We will hear you again on this matter" (Acts 17:32). The jaded minds of the Athenian philisophers, who "spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing" (Acts 17:21), were unrepentant. This is the core of the problem of the "so what" culture, today. Sinners are no longer impressed by the biblical vision of a court of judgment presided over by the risen and righteous Son of God. If the resurrection makes no impression, then our "faith is empty," and we are "yet in our sins," according to 1 Corinthians 15:17. Too many Christians, in addition to those in the unsaved world, are skeptics, when it comes to the moral suasion that is based on the resurrection of Christ. They are more powerfully persuaded by the moral bankruptcy of "Conventional Wisdom." But, Paul writes, "Where is the wise? Where is the scribe?

Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified (a message that entails of necessity the resurrection of Jesus, Romans 1:4), to the Jews it is a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." (1 Corinthians 1:20-25). There is therefore a streak of skepticism running through those who are not made to blush at the enormity of their sins, and who will not "repent in sackcloth and ashes."

Is remorse no longer a virtue? The Word says that the Christians at Corinth, who had first followed the "so what" line when it was pointed out to them that they were tolerating the brazen act of a rank sinner in their midst (1 Corinthians 5:1-2), later repented sincerely under the rebuke of Paul, who was moved to write, "Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter" (2 Corinthians 7:9-11).

Where are the Christians today who display this same urgency to be restored to righteousness, after being charged with sin? Too often, the shrug of indifference is their response. It is a dangerous reaction, because it holds the forgiveness of God in reserve, and persistent shrugging "brands the conscience" of the sinner, leaving a scar devoid of sensitive nerves. The "jaws of hell" are wide open to receive such adamant sinners.

These consequences are evident in the letter of rebuke written by the Lord to the church in Thyatira. He wrote, by the hand of the Apostle John, "Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality ....And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works." However, Christ offers a ray of hope to those who did not resist His appeal for repentance. "Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come" (Revelation 2:20-25).

Moral sensitivity is a virtue that is absolutely essential for the Christian to possess. If

tears of remorse, godly sorrow, and repentance result from the loving rebuke of the Lord uttered in the mouths of His faithful proclaimers of the truth, these actions befit the true character of those who recognize spiritual "reality." As we have seen in all other applications within this document, reality only exists for those who respect divine authority, treating the word of God for what it truly is. Paul was grateful to find this attitude in the hearts of the Christians at Thessaloniki (1 Thessalonians 2:13), and it would gratify messengers of the Word today, as well.

## Chapter Seven

### Cleaning Up The Mess

I once observed a resident in a nursing home, a woman who could seldom say anything even vaguely sequential or logical, talking to a fellow resident who was in a similar mental condition. In a rare moment of lucidity, she said to her stupified neighbor, "There are two questions which we must ask ourselves. The first is, 'Where are we?' and the second is, 'What are we doing here?'" At that point in time, I thought her remarks were amusing, and I have often told the story to others who found it amusing. But it is not amusing, when we hear the same two questions from modern preachers, speaking of the moral depravity of our nation.

They ask, "Where are we?" The answer is, of course, "We are in a moral mess." Then they ask, "Why are we in this mess?" This requires an answer which many of them are reluctant to discover. They apparently do not have the least notion as to the answer. Is it because that morals in Christian living are no longer important? If that were the answer, we would not look on the condition of society as a "mess." It would be an "I'm alright, you're alright" kind of world. More likely, we are in a moral mess, because many preachers don't know what is moral anymore. As a result, morals have little place in the preaching of modern churches.

Our nation's "moral mess" can be attributed in large part to these failures of modern preachers. They have been trained in the school of the Social Gospel, and have directed their preaching toward things that have very little to do with Christian behavior in the field of morality. If doctrine is preached, it is generally speculative. For example, the popular subject of the "2nd coming" is preached with passion, and "romanced" with all its exciting speculative prospects---the destiny of the modern State of Israel---"Wars and rumors of wars"---but without any application to personal moral preparation for the return of the Lord. Yet, the Apostle Peter had no difficulty in learning what to tell his readers. He said, "The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 4:7-11). It is significant that Peter tells "speakers" to prepare people for the "end of all things" by preaching the "utterances of God." Instead of these principles, politics and punditry have replaced piety and purification in sermons. The profound moral dogmas of Christianity have been compromised, moderated, and modified, to accommodate the lusts of those in the

pew. The Bible itself has become an emasculated book, trivialized and scorned as morally obsolescent.

Typical of the surrender of modern preachers to the so-called New Morality is a conversation I once heard on the radio between an interviewer and a high official in one of the mainline denominations. Verbatim quotations cannot be reproduced here, but the gist of the conversation was this: the bishop had gained a fleeting fame in his church for having ordained an admitted homosexual into the ministry. He expressed regret for having done so, however, because it seems that the homosexual priest had brought into his ministry a hidden agenda that was not approved by the church hierarchy. He had trashed the institution of heterosexual marriage. He had advocated promiscuous homosexual activity. For this, and other peccadilloes, he had to be removed from his office.

The bishop should have known that his ordination of an avowed sinner was wrong from a diligent study of the Word of God, and faithful adherence to its teaching. At the moment when I applauded his action of defrocking the homosexual priest, however, he disappointed me in another moral position. He stated that the church did not have the right to tell certain women to refrain from premarital sex (characterized in the Bible as the sin of fornication). His reason for holding this position was that some women were entering the work force to follow "careers," were therefore marrying at later ages than prior generations (when women usually maintained their virginity until early marriage), and should not therefore be deprived the pleasure of sex outside of marriage by these circumstances. If the church can wink at the sin of female fornication, why cannot it overlook the excesses of militant homosexuality?

This kind of thinking has been popularized in the religious world as "situation ethics." But this rationale is unalterably opposed to the ethic promoted in the Bible. Because of its tacit denial of Bible authority, situation ethics has provided a confusing flexible moral quagmire for modern Christians. They have been duped by its appeal to their flesh rather than to their spiritual nature. The conflict between flesh and spirit is evident in Paul's letter to the Galatians. He wrote, "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please" (Galatians 5:17). But Christians are to choose a spiritual impetus in their lives. Paul seems to take it for granted that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24). In Romans 8:13-14, he says, "...if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God."

Preachers who have failed to fortify their parishoners, morally, need to be instrumental in cleaning up their own mess. They can follow the admonition given by Paul to the young preacher, Titus, when he said, "But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine." This is how the New American Standard Bible renders Titus 2:1. ("Sound doctrine" is defined in 1 Timothy 6:3, where Paul condemns anyone who

"...advocates a different doctrine, and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness.") The Twentieth Century New Testament clarifies Titus 2:1 with the translation, "But speak of such things as properly have a place in sound Christian Teaching." Kenneth Taylor, in his Living Letters, paraphrases it, "But as for you, speak up for the right living that goes along with true Christianity." This apostolic command to preachers is not being obeyed in many modern pulpits.

The context of Titus 2:1 tells some of the things which "befit sound doctrine."

"...that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience; the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things-- that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed. Likewise exhort the young men to be sober-minded, in all things showing yourself to be a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, sound speech that cannot be condemned, that one who is an opponent may be ashamed, having nothing evil to say of you. Exhort bondservants to be obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all things, not answering back, not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things."

The conduct to be preached to various groupings of Christians aims toward definite goals, "that the word of God may not be blasphemed," or "...that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things." The preacher's goal is to show himself as "...a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, sound speech that cannot be condemned, that one who is an opponent may be ashamed, having nothing evil to say of you."

The minister who does not bear this responsibility will certainly not teach his hearers the way of godliness, and will leave both himself, and his hearers, open to criticism for professing to be Christians while serving the Devil. The time for reform in the church is not past. But, in order to have a full reformation, Conventional Wisdom must be completely abandoned in favor of "Preaching the word, being urgent in season, and out of season, reproof, rebuking and exhorting with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Timothy 4:2).

## Chapter Eight

### Curing the 4th of July Syndrome

To many American Christians, it's a 4th of July world. They have been so infected by the climate of freedom that has evolved in our country that they are inclined to carry this aura of freedom into the church. This attitude is connected with much of what we have discussed before. Freedom from restraint is the exact mode in which selfishness flourishes. The practitioners of the "So What Culture" say that it is none of your business what they do. The "Age of Tolerance" has made it possible for the freedom-loving person to tolerate the free choices of others without making any judgment. The "Feelgood Generation" wants to be left free to destroy themselves in perverse sensuality. The mentality that is needed in the Christian, however, is that of a slave. There is a definite spirit behind Paul's oft-repeated description of himself as a "servant of Christ," or a "servant of God." He is joined in this self-deprecating description by James, Peter, and Jude, in their New Testament letters. Paul also describes our relationship to Christ in the same way. He writes to the Romans, "In love of the brethren be tenderly affectioned one to another; in honor preferring one another; in diligence not slothful; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord" (Romans 12:10-11). He reminds both the slaves and masters in the church at Colossae that they "serve the Lord Christ" (Colossians 3:22-4:1). The slave mentality, with its restrictions and confinements, does not appeal to those who suffer the "4th of July Syndrome." Service is not their thing. Yet, it is the very thing needed in the Christian.

Let us indulge ourselves with an illustrative parable concerning this problem. Suppose that this scenario happened in the days when slavers combed Africa to obtain chattels to be transported to the plantations of the New World. A slave trader of a different stamp comes to the Ivory Coast, and embarks on a new way of capturing slaves. He presses into the jungle to find his prospects, and he runs into a man struggling to make his garden meagerly provide for his needs. The man is surprised to see this sea captain there, but he is not afraid. The slaver walks up to him, and asks, "Friend, how would you like to sail with me to a new land, where you would be parted from your kin forever, mixed together with others like yourself from many tribes and tongues and nations, and where you would work a lifetime as a slave for a very kind and benevolent plantation owner?"

No doubt, at first, the man would be incredulous. He would probably answer with something equivalent to, "Are you kidding me, man?"

The slaver would answer, sincerely, "No, I am perfectly serious."

"You're telling me that it would be a great advantage for me to sail off with you to God knows where, so that I could be a slave?"

Again, the slaver would say, "That is exactly what I am telling you. I am only trying to

give you a realistic view of your opportunity."

The future slave, at this point, would probably laugh. He would have the option to say either "No thanks," or he might have the inquisitiveness to ask, "What's in it for me?"

This is what the slaver hopes to hear. To such a question, he would first have to answer, "Nothing but the necessities of life," but then he could offer the hope that one day, after a satisfactory life of servitude to his master, he could expect to be happily retired to a beautiful home where he would never have to work any more.

If the prospective slave was still interested at this point, he might ask, "Can you show me this in writing?"

Prepared for this question, the slaver would whip out his copies of the "Declaration of Independence," and the "Constitution of the United States of America," and say, "Here! Read these documents, and see if what I am saying is so."

Glancing over the papers, the prospective slave sees that there are a number of words he doesn't understand, and he objects, "Looks like heavy reading for me."

"Well, do the best you can, and when I return I will explain what you don't understand. O. K.?"

The villager agrees, and puts them in his pocket to read that night. There proves to be some interesting things in the documents. When he reads in the Declaration of Independence that God has created all men equal, and that they have a right to be free of tyranny, he is impressed. When he peruses the Constitution, he perceives that the government under which he will live will strive for equal justice to all, and that there is the promise of better things to come.

When the slaver returns, the few doubts he has are resolved, and the prospective slave begins to weigh the promises of what he has read against the poor life and hard labor he has endured to this point. He suspects that the slaver is giving him the "worst case scenario," and that there are actually riches to be gained in the new land. The promise that the "burden" of slavery will be "light," persuades him to agree to the slaver's proposition.

"Good," the slaver says, and gives him instructions on reporting to the ship, which will be ready to sail on the tide.

The potential slave turns his back on his family and village, and reports on board the ship with only the sparse clothes on his back. He expects that the vessel will be packed to the gunwales with others who have made the same decision, but he finds only a few.

On the journey through the water that separates Africa from the United States, he is well housed, well-fed, and on his arrival at the plantation he is given labor that is enjoyable and satisfying, while his master keeps him encouraged with the prospect of freedom from his servitude, after a short period of service.

We could go on with this story, telling of the ultimate goal of this benign slavery, but you have already seen the point it tries to make. Christianity is this kind of servitude. Yet, it is a thankless servitude, because a slave is expected to render service without resistance, and without immediate expectations. Jesus shows this in a parable, when he

says, "And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do'" (Luke 17:7-10).

Under such demanding conditions of slavery, there might some who decide to be "runaways," seeking to serve their own interests, rather than those of the master. From the presumed hardship of Christianity, they escape to a life that only spells ultimate degrading doom. Having squandered their worldly inheritance, like the famous Prodigal Son of Jesus' parable, in the pig pen of contemplation they may again "come to themselves," and reason that the lowliest slaves in the house of the Father are better off, even in servitude. The determination to accept benign servitude is easy. The willingness to forfeit the status of "son" for "slave" seems worthy, and necessary.

The Christian who has a realistic view of his slavery to God and Christ learns that there is in this servitude the appearance of perfect freedom...freedom from sin...freedom from spiritual hunger...freedom from the Evil One. The Apostle Paul discusses the conditions of this freedom-type servitude in Romans 6:16-23. He says, "Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The Apostle Peter shows this combination of freedom and slavery in this way. "For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men-- as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God" (1 Peter 2:15-16).

Freedom from sin is the grand prize of the Christian slave. Jesus proclaimed this, when he said, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." His hearers answered, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, 'You will be made free'?" (They had wilfully forgotten the many periods of bondage that Israel suffered at the hands of their enemies.) Then Jesus answered them by saying, "Most

assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed." (John 8:31-36).

An analogy of our condition can be seen in the story of Hagar in the book of Genesis. She was an Egyptian girl who was made a body slave to Sarah, the wife of Abraham. When Sarah perceived that she was unable to bear children in her advanced age, she offered her handmaid to Abraham as a surrogate. Abraham agreed, and made Hagar his second wife, with all the privileges pertaining thereto. Hagar conceived a child by Abraham, and, in spite of her former generosity, Sarah could not keep herself from being jealous. She treated Hagar so badly that the girl ran away. In the wilderness, however, an Angel of God found her, and sent her back to her mistress, and to slavery (See Genesis 16:1-16).

Hagar's condition, both as an honored wife, and a slave, can be compared to the Christian's dual role as an adopted child and servant. Our adoption is described by Paul in Ephesians 1:3-5, which reads, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will."

Servants of Christ can obtain "promotions" of a sort. Jesus told his faithful disciples at the Last Supper, "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you." (John 15:15). Paul told the Galatian Christians of another promotion. "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!' Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ" (Galatians 4:4-7).

To be both a child of God, and His slave, seems to be contradictory, but these are figures which express to us the condition of being a Christian. The child of God is a "joint heir with Christ." But, at the same time, he is bound to a servitude that channels his thoughts and deeds. Paul writes, "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:3-5). To this, he adds in another place, "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him" (Colossians 3:17). Everything the Christian does, therefore, is done "in the name of the Lord." He acts by His authority. This is the essence of servitude--obedience. Yet, it is the most profitable freedom that we can have. It is not the kind of freedom that

feeds our excesses, but which restrains us from those things that can destroy our hopes. This is a good point on which to end this essay on reality checks for Christians. Modern Christians have been too heavily influenced by conventional human wisdom. But Christ is to us "wisdom from God" (1 Corinthians 1:30), and the inspired James tells us, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." (James 1:5-8). He augments this instruction by asking, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy." (James 3:13-17).

No one who submits himself voluntarily in slavery to this wisdom need be disappointed in his decision. He rises above the wisdom of the world. He enjoys all the spiritual blessings of God. And, he will certainly be different from the common herd of men. If today, some Christians can hardly be distinguished from the worldly-wise, there needs to be a reformation. Paul's formula for this profound reformation is.....

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." (Romans 12:1-2).