

Expository Files



Jon W. Quinn, Warren E. Berkley - Editors

EF 13.1 Jan. 2006

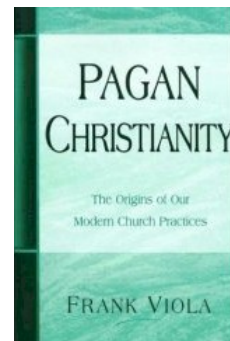
Front Page

Pagan Christianity (by Frank Viola) Reviewed

By Warren E. Berkley

“Have you ever wondered why we Christians do what we do for church every Sunday morning?” This inquiry is the lead sentence on the back cover of a 2002 book published by Present Testimony Ministry. The book is ***Pagan Christianity*** by Frank Viola.

Viola writes in a style typical of iconoclasts and hyperactive reformers. He has discovered something almost everybody else has missed and he seeks to be our teacher. Before he lays out his agenda, you know he has one. With inflated urgency he uncovers the apostasy he has discovered in (to name a few sins): *the order of worship, preachers and preaching, church buildings, dressing up for services and the order of New Testament epistles*. The title ***Pagan Christianity*** reflects his thesis that all such things have no basis in the Scriptures but were appropriated over time into the modern practice of “churchianity.” The promotional blurb makes the claim: “This book is reserved for those who are ready to embark on an eye-opening venture that challenges every aspect of their church experience as well as offering a better alternative.” Out with the old, in with the new.



Frank Viola is “a high school Psychology and Philosophy teacher,” who in “his spare time...plants house churches, speaks at church-life conferences,

and authors books on Christ and His church.” On one of the opening pages he says that he “left the religious system.” One of his arguments against preaching is “it suffocates mutual ministry.” And as he debates the case against church buildings, he implies the friendlier, warmer atmosphere of a house (the sofa over the pew). **So the agenda emerges.** He is a destroyer of one system in the interests of promoting another. This phenomenon (the house church movement) is built on certain common premises: (1) smaller is better, (2) informality {though defined by the leaders} is preferable over order, (3) spontaneous/conversational teaching is superior to a prepared orderly presentation, (4) diversity is celebrated, (5) breaking from “tradition,” and (6) opposition to pulpits, buildings and treasuries. All of these items (like a systematic theology) show up in some form in Viola’s book, urged upon the reader as a warmer, more spiritual atmosphere and derived from the New Testament (not as a “manual,” but more like a love-letter hermeneutic).

Viola’s proof is highly touted on the back cover and in promotional material: “Viola proves his point by documenting every claim he makes.” Well, there are abundant footnotes. **Yet proof lies not in the quantity of footnotes but the content.** Often, the author quotes himself! Or he quotes from others who have said what he is saying. There is a conspicuous deficiency in Scripture citations and no attempt to expound passages. He makes only passing reference to key passages on the subjects addressed. He is heavy on what a passage does not say, but usually silent on the real meaning. Some of his historical references bear some scrutiny, but he falls far short of “documenting every claim he makes.”

He is critical and cynical about the claim: “The New Testament is our guide for faith and practice,” but then seeks to make his case by quoting almost every book in antiquity **except the New Testament**, with weighty dependence on modern writers *who also “left the religious system.”* What we need on these subjects is serious, objective and prayerful exposition of Scripture. No doubt, there are subjects and issues to be critically visited, but with Scripture in hand. That will serve us better. (I just remembered – I was engaged in conversation with a prominent reformer 30 years ago who was pleading for an emphasis on “grace” that I had reason to question. When I asked him where I could find this “approach” he was so zealous about he said, “read my books.” I was really asking him for a higher authority! I have found this characteristic of militant reformers, citing their own writings as proof of their own writings!)

Like most reformers, Viola manages to express some valid issues that need attention. He well states the clergy-laity distinction. He is clear about the disastrous domination of clergymen, the official function of “pastors” who enforce denominational creed and tradition, and even speaks with validity against the Charismatic movement and its’ impact in modern worship “styles.” I believe there is veneration of religious architecture that can cripple us both spiritually and financially, though Viola goes way beyond questioning an expediency. He well shows the origin of things like the altar call and choral presentations. Likewise, he is on the mark regarding infant baptism, sprinkling and the “sinner’s prayer.” These portions of Viola’s work will provoke thought and study that can have good result, even though he is lacking in providing scriptural evidence and stuck on the claim of pagan origin.

In his firestorm against preachers and preaching he is particularly contentious against the public sermon. Ignoring the extensive direct evidence of the role of preaching (Acts, 1, 2 Timothy, Titus), he utters his prejudice against public preaching. He says: “Ironically, ‘the Book’ knows nothing of a sermon.” He lays the blame on pagans and puritans (in that order). To make clear his resistance he says again: “...that the sermon does not have a shred of Biblical merit to support its existence...”

His opposition to the sermon is a function of his firmly held mutual ministry, house church model. He argues that the sermon is a “one-way affair,” that “produces passivity,” “lames the church from functioning,” “suffocates mutual ministry” and “smothers open participation.” He is painting with a wide brush here, and covering up things of value in the sweep.

Did Peter preach a sermon on the Day of Pentecost? What did that sermon about Jesus Christ and Him crucified produce? “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them,” and “with many other words he testified and exhorted them,” (see Acts 2:22-47). This was no “one-way affair!” God’s truth was presented with power and people were persuaded to participate. The sermon generated activity in the hearts of people who became obedient to God, who functioned without suffocation (by sermons) and who had favor with all the people. All of that sounds good to me.

I understand the “excessive and pathological dependence on the clergy,” but I’m not willing to classify all preaching within that condemnation. (This is the same old stuff – human abuse is cited as the reason to cast out something legitimate when used properly.) When we tell people what the Word of God says and challenge the right response, there is no excess or pathology in that! Let’s expose and condemn the real problem, without throwing out the legitimate.

And I’m wondering about something. Frank Viola has written a book. What is it that lifts his book out of the condemned category? What if someone read his book to a group of people (he does affirm his book to be needed truth)? Would the reading of his book stifle spiritual health and create a pathological dependence on his writings or books in general? Nonsense.

Don’t overlook, Viola is a high school teacher. When he speaks to a class in a building with attention focused on him, does he consider that to be an exercise that is passive, tradition bound and pagan? Likewise, he “speaks at church-life conferences!” Apparently the kind of speaking he does he values in some way. Yet he reacts with outrage when someone stands before an audience and directs their attention to the text of Scripture in an orderly form without interruption. This is the excess and decoration of a militant reformer, who is in bondage to his system while attacking another. It is gimmickry and passion born in the contention of a reformers narrow mentality, not based on the content of Scripture.

Behind the charm and sophistry of these reformers there is an arrogant spirit. Mr. Viola wants us to know that “the NT is not a manual for church practice.” Yet, he wants us to be led by “the light that is within you!” When all of that has been said, the footnote on the last page of the book is truly the bottom line. He says in this small print entry: “If you plan to leave the institutional church, I strongly recommend that you read the next volume in this series: *So You Want To Start A House Church? First-Century Styled Church Planting For Today* (www.ptmin.org/start.htm). It will give you the next step.”

Unbelievable! He steers us away from the New Testament, then recommends his next book as our next step. Now here is my recommendation. Don’t let any man dictate “the next step.” Not Viola, Berkley or any man. Open the Bible. Read what it says, and let God direct your steps (Psa. 37:23; 119:133).

Good Recently Published Resources To Study The House Church Movement:

“The House Church Movement,” Harry Osborne; in *The Renewing Of Your Mind*, 2004 Truth Magazine Lectures, GOT Foundation, 2004.

“The House Church Movement,” Jim Deason; *True Worship*, 2205 FC Lectures.

It's Not About Seniority!

Matt. 20:1-16

Warren E. Berkley

The parable of the workers in Matthew twenty is set within the borders of two statements the Lord made that appear to be identical.

In the textual sequence, notice in 19:30 – “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” The parable follows this statement. Then after the parable: “So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen,” (20:16). Knowing what these statements are about can give us an advantage in understanding the parable.

The first statement (19:30) is part of the Lord’s response to Peter’s question, “...we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?” Jesus assured him of the privilege of apostolic function (sitting “on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel,” v.28), and Jesus also spoke to the abundant blessings for “everyone” who follows Him. Christians receive far more than they give up (v.29). Then comes the statement: “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” **Jesus wants Peter and the other disciples to know, reward in the kingdom (both immediate and ultimate) is not dispensed according to seniority or time in service.** The apostles had been with Jesus from the beginning of His work (Acts 1:21-22). And while they had a special work or role not shared by all kingdom citizens, still, reward in the kingdom (immediate and ultimate) is not based on how long you have served. It is based on the grace of God, and the quality (depth, perseverance) of your response to His grace. There is an equality in the abundance of blessings citizens in the kingdom receive, that is reckoned by grace not time cards (*so much work, so much pay*). So the last to enter the kingdom have full remission of sins and hope, just as those who are veterans. It is all about grace, not about when you enter or some human standard of rank.

The parable in Matthew 20 illustrates that. Taking off from Peter’s question, what we gain from following Christ doesn’t depend upon the

calendar or time clock. It is about diligence of heart, acting as a chosen one from the time you start (early or late). “Christ has turned the accepted order of things upside down: His kingdom includes those like little children (18:2), but excludes those like the ruler (v.25). Some who think they are great by men’s standards, do not rate highly at all by heaven’s standards. And those ranked last by men shall be ranked first in heaven. To underscore this, Jesus will give a parable (20:1-16) that amplifies the principle: ‘many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first’,” (20:16; 16:25). (Ken Chumbley, *The Gospel of Matthew*, commentary, p.#351).

Now the parable: A landowner went out early in the morning (6 am) to hire laborers for his vineyard. Most likely, this is about a farmer who needed workers immediately – as many as he could get - to bring in the harvest. The grape harvest, for example, might ripen and need to be taken in quickly before threatening weather. In such circumstances, it was common for farmers to go out in the morning to seek workers from something like a day labor pool (workers available, waiting to be hired even for temporary work).

The landowner in this parable found some workers, put them in the fields for the common daily wage. Then he went back out about “the third hour,” (9 am) to find more laborers. He saw men not working. He “said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ And they went.” While these men didn’t start work at the same time as the early workers, they were promised “whatever is right.”

“Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise,” (v.5). Even late into the date, “the eleventh hour he went out and found others” not working. He said to them, “Why have you been standing here idle all day?” They said, “no one hired us.” “He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive,’” (v7b).

At the end of the day, time came for the workers to be paid. “So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and give them *their* wages, beginning with the last to the first.’ And when those came who *were hired* about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received *it*, they complained against the landowner, saying, ‘These last *men* have worked *only* one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’ But he answered one of them

and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take *what is* yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man *the same* as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’ So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.” (Matt. 20:8-16)

Observe that nobody was cheated! Not a single worker was underpaid. While it may be argued (based on human, subjective, economic comparisons) that some were overpaid, nobody was cheated. The complaint of the early workers offered no evidence of wrongdoing. It was a complaint born in hearts of jealousy, not objective reality. “None of them received less than they expected and many received more,” (Chumbley, #354). We should rejoice in the good others receive.

The landowner had the right to “overpay” the late workers. He said “whatever is right you will receive.” He determined what was right, not based on ordinary human accounting, but grace. His overpayment of the late workers was his choice and nobody could argue he didn’t have that right.

What counts in the kingdom of God is not seniority or years of service, but diligence of heart as a chosen one. Through the parable, it is like Jesus said to Peter and the others: “*You are privileged to be with Me, to be here early, to ‘sit on twelve thrones.’ But others will come into the kingdom. You must not claim a special honor above them or an exalted place over them (see Matt. 20:25-28). All men, no matter when they come in, are equally precious to God.*” Reward in the kingdom is not dispensed by virtue of time served but by grace extended to the chosen (willing; many are called but not willing). Seniority does not necessarily mean honor. Experience in years doesn’t promise greater pay. **Remember, it is all based on grace** – not ordinary human economic calculations of so much pay for so much work. William Barclay said this well, with these words: “Sometimes a man dies full of years and full of honor, with his day’s work ended and his task completed. Sometimes a young person dies almost before the door of life and achievement have opened at all. From God they will both receive the same welcome, for both Jesus Christ is waiting, and for neither, in the divine sense, has life ended too soon or too late.” (p.#225, THE DAILY STUDY BIBLE SERIES, William Barclay).

“Jesus’ story makes no economic sense, and that was his intent. He was giving us a parable about grace, which cannot be calculated like a day’s

wages. The employer in Jesus' story did not cheat the full-day workers. No, the full-day workers got what they were promised. Their discontent arose from the *scandalous* mathematics of grace. They would not accept that their employer had the right to do what he wanted with his money when it meant paying *scoundrels* twelve times what they deserved. Significantly, many Christians who study this parable identify with the employees who put in a full day's work, rather than the add-ons at the end of the day. We like to think of ourselves as responsible workers, and the employer's strange behavior baffles us as it did the original hearers. We risk missing the story's point: that God dispenses gifts, not wages. None of us gets paid according to merit, for none of us comes close to satisfying God's requirements for a perfect life. If paid on the basis of fairness, we would all end up in hell," (Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, 61-62).

It is not merely the time that we put in. It is the heart that we put into the time we have.

***“By What Authority Do
You Do These Things?”***
(Matt. 21:23; Mrk. 11:28 & Lk. 20:2)
Kyle Pope

When Jesus finished the sermon on the mount Scripture tells us that the people were amazed- **“for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”** (Matthew 7:29, NKJV). Joseph Henry Thayer in his *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* tells us that the word *exousia* translated “authority” here, means - “the power of rule or government (the power of him whose will and commands must be submitted to by others and obeyed)” (p. 225). When Jesus taught He was giving commands that the people were to obey. This was different from the approach which the scribes and pharisees used.

This demonstration of authority was not always well received. Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us of an occasion when the chief priests, scribes and elders asked Jesus - **“By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?”** (Matthew 21:23, cf. Mark 11:28 & Luke 20:2). On this occasion, because of the hardness of their hearts in rejecting John the Baptist, Jesus did not answer their question directly. However, on other occasions, He directly addressed this issue. John tells us in three

passages how explicitly Jesus answered this matter. In John 7:16 Jesus said, **“My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me.”** In John 12:49 He said, **“For I have not spoken on My own [authority]; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak.”** And finally, in John 14:24 He said, **“the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me.”** Jesus, shows us with these words that He Himself, God the Son, was acting under the authority of God the Father.

After Jesus' resurrection, the extent of Jesus' authority was broadened. As He gives His apostles the charge to teach all the nations, He begins with the words, **“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”** (Matthew 28:18). This tells us that God the Father gave to Jesus the right to command all the universe. As a result all of the universe is obligated to obey Jesus' teachings and submit themselves to His authority. This was promised in Deuteronomy 18:18-19, when God told Moses, **“I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And it shall be [that] whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require [it] of him.”**

When the apostles went out to preach they acknowledged Divine authority, and held themselves under such authority. In the first sermon which they preach, they teach the Jews on the day of Pentecost to, **“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ”** (Acts 2:38). The apostle Paul taught the Christians in Colosse, **“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). To act “n the name” of Jesus is to act with and under the authority of Jesus. This meant that the apostles' message, like that of Jesus, was not their own but from the One who sent them. Paul praised the church in Thessalonica saying, **“when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed [it] not [as] the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.”** (I Thessalonians 2:13). The writings of the apostles held the same authority. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, **“If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord.”** (I Corinthians 14:37).

Just as God had promised to give authority to Jesus, Jesus had promised to give authority to His apostles. Jesus encouraged His disciples saying,

“when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.” (Matthew 10:19-20). If people rejected the message of the apostles, Jesus taught that it was the same as rejecting Jesus, and rejecting God the Father. Luke tells us that Jesus told His apostles, **“He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me.”** (10:16).

When we look to the Bible we have the written teachings of Jesus. Whether we look at the Gospel accounts of Jesus' words while on the earth or the records of what the apostles taught, we have before us the teachings (or doctrine) of Jesus. This is the standard of authority that must be obeyed. This is the source from which we must derive the authority for all that we say and do in service to God.

How can we establish from Scripture authority for what we do in service to God? First we must understand what the Bible is. Quite simply, it is the written will of God. It was given to the apostles and prophets of the first century in order to communicate understandable information to ordinary human beings. When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he claimed that the things which he wrote explained the plan of God which had previously been a mystery. He told them, **“when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ, which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets”** (Ephesians 3:4-5). When Paul tells them, “when you read, you may understand” it shows us that Scripture is not some dark enigma that can not be unraveled, but written communication that can be understood just as we do any other type of written communication.

When we read a letter, a story, an article or some type of instructional literature we use the same basic methods to discern the meaning of the material. We consider what the document states directly, what it describes and what it infers about the subject in question. All of this information is taken into account in order to ascertain the content of the piece. The Bible is no different. There are direct statements that which explicitly command or direct some behavior. There are descriptions of behavior that is approved or condemned. There are, in the context of some broader discussion, details which are inferred which further clarify meaning.

If we are going to act under the authority of Jesus in what we do in service to God what will determine whether or not we have authority for the things we do? There are many direct statements that are in the Bible. Some to specific individuals and not to anyone else (e.g. Abraham's charge to sacrifice Isaac - Genesis 22:2). Other commands fall under a distinct period of jurisdiction, and do not apply to those under Christ (e.g. Animal Sacrifice under the Law of Moses). If Jesus Christ now has all authority, and He gave His instructions to His apostles, it would follow that the first source we should look to in order to establish authority would be Jesus and the apostles direct commands.

Next, we look to the descriptions of things in the Bible. Again, if we are interested in acting under the authority of Christ our pattern can not be drawn from descriptions of behavior that was not subject to the authority of Christ (e.g. Israel under the Law of Moses or Gentiles without God). That brings us to what is described in the New Testament. Here we find descriptions of things that were approved and things that were not approved. If Jesus taught that rejection of the apostles was rejection of Him (Luke 10:16), it would follow that those descriptions which serve as binding examples to us today are the approved examples of behavior carried out under Christ and the apostles.

Finally, as a piece of written material, the Bible is filled with numerous topics and discussions of issues. The inferences within these discourses to things which have been commanded or described further clarify the application of what is authorized under Christ. As with any literature, inferences are often more subjective (i.e. subject to personal opinion and perspective) than direct statements or descriptions. One person might draw an inference from some nuance of wording which totally eludes another person. Or, there might be inferential references to things that are incidental to the matter under consideration. As a result, when we look to the inferences of Scripture we must look to those necessary inferences that clarify approved examples or direct commands. When such inferences offer inescapable conclusions about a matter under consideration, they establish authority for action in service to God.

Many in the world conduct themselves as if there is no need to establish divine authority in religion. The question posed to Jesus remains particularly applicable to such people today, "by what authority are you doing these things?" Jesus and the apostles acted under divine authority. What about us?

For more of bro. Pope's material:

<http://kmpope.home.att.net/>

The Power of God and the Faith of Man
(1 Peter 1:3-9)
By Jon W. Quinn

Where is my security and confidence as a Christian? When I fall short of what I ought to be, in how much jeopardy am I? Some would say that once a person is saved he can never be lost because salvation was planned by God for each person before the world was. If I am one who God decided to save, then I cannot be lost. But there are too many warnings in the Scripture about people falling and instructions on what to do to keep from falling.

But there are not only two possibilities. It is not that it is either all on God or all on me. The Lord does not assume all responsibility for keeping me saved, but neither does He lay it all on me either. The Lord has promised to be with us, to protect and strengthen, guard and sustain all who live by faith - but we must live by faith. "And those who know Thy name will put their trust in Thee; For Thou, O Lord, hast not forsaken those who seek Thee." (Psalm 9:10). A wonderful Biblical text of assurance is found in the Scripture as written by Peter:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls". (1 Peter 1:3-9)

Kept By The Power of God

Peter wrote that we are "kept by the power of God." In this case, "kept" means to guard and protect. He wants you to spend eternity with Him in glory (Colossians 1:19-22). I sure am glad this is something He wants! The Lord looks forward to sharing with us what will be perfect fellowship and a dynamic, expanding existence with a wonderful environment of beauty and eternally unfolding wonders.

Paul knew that the Lord could deliver Him from every evil deed. (2 Timothy 4:18). Jude expressed the same idea (Jude 1:1). Do you believe that God can keep His children saved if the Devil wants them lost? Your answer, I hope, is a resounding "Yes, He can!" But He leaves it up to the children to exercise their faith; "who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5). Faith, or trust itself becomes the means to overcome doubt, despair and cynicism.

Our Present Responsibility

The doubter fails to place His trust in God who is powerful to save. The Calvinists fails to recognize the role God has ordained for our faith to play in keeping saved. Both are mistakes.

Note again the Scriptures: "...to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:4,5).

Now if I left out the words "through faith" then it would all be up to God. But faith is the right human response to God's grace and power. We must not leave out the prescribed human response. If we leave our faith then we also leave God's protection. They work together to secure our salvation. Note again Colossians 1:21-22; and this time add verse 23: "And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach -- if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister."

Note the very emphatic "if indeed" as underlined above in these verses. There are no substitutes and no exceptions. We must "continue in the faith" and we must not be "moved away from the hope of the gospel" to find ourselves presented "holy and blameless" before God.

Recall that Paul had confidence, but it was based on God's willingness and power to save him as well as Paul's own faithfulness in living (see 2 Timothy 4:7,8; 18). Likewise, as we have seen, Jude's confidence was also based on continued faith, and was not without the understanding that it was possible to fall away and be lost (Jude 1; 20,21) We must put our trust in the One who can save us (vs. 24).

If We Remain In Him, He Will Remain With Us

God keeping us by His power and our keeping ourselves by our faith in Him are related. God keeps those who keep His word (Revelation 3:8,10). We need to walk in a worthy manner (1 Thessalonians 2:12,13; 5:21,22) and God is faithful to bring us to victory (vs. 23,24; see also 2 Timothy 1:12-14).

These words of confidence were written to men and women just like ourselves. They had struggles; they were not always what they ought to be, but as they walked by faith, they glorified God and asked for forgiveness for their failures. This way, they were able to live in hope and confidence. If I am lost, it will be because of my own unfaithfulness, for God is always faithful (2 Timothy 2:12,13). As we learn to depend upon Christ hope grows. It is never lost just because things in this world cause momentary distress (2 Corinthians 4:17,18). I must continue to live "in Christ" (Romans 8:1; 35-39).

There is no reason that your confidence this day and every day cannot echo the confidence of the words we have read. God is as powerful and as interested in our salvation as He was in theirs. In addition to that, He has ordained that all that is necessary is your active, living faith. We have seen that there is "no condemnation in Christ" and that is where you need to be - "in Christ" (Galatians 3:26,27).

Bad Seed?
Matt 13:27
Zeke Flores

I shouldn't be surprised anymore at the things I see in the religious world. I mean, I knew that when Easter came around this year the area churches would have their sunrise services, concerts, parties, egg hunts complete with people in big bunny suits, not to mention multiple other recreations. One church urges the public to "discover the true meaning of Easter" while suggesting that it can be done with a rock concert and catered dinner. I wonder if they'll tell folks that the "real meaning" of Easter is rooted in a pagan sacrifice festival in honor of the goddess of spring, Eostre or that the Easter egg and bunny are pagan symbols for the re-awakening of life in the earth during springtime. Oh well, I'm digressing. What I really wonder is why all these people who claim that the word of God is powerful enough to save people (Rom 1:16) obviously don't think it's powerful enough to draw folks to it.

Consider in the parable of the tares (Matt 13:24-30) the slaves of the landowner notice that tares (poisonous weeds) were growing with the wheat they had planted. They question their master about the quality of the seed they planted: "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?" (Matt13:27) The landowner explains that an enemy has infiltrated the field planting bad seed alongside the good. The principle we may miss is this: Good seed produces a good plant. The concept seems reiterated in the parable of the sower and the seed (Matt 13:3-9, 18-23). There, Jesus explains that it is the condition of the soil that either promotes or hinders growth. But still, in light of what religious people do in order to entice folks to services, we might ask "Is the seed (the word of God - Luke 8:11) any good?"

To answer this, let's go back to the commission Jesus gave His apostles in Matt 28:18-20. His instructions for saving the world are amazingly simple. He instructs them to make disciples by baptizing and teaching them. That's it. Just a steady diet of the word of God. What? No concerts, catered dinners or egg hunts? How could just the word of God draw anybody?

Consider what Jesus said: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'and they shall all be taught of God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me." (John 6:44;45) That's it. No undue inducement by a promise of a good time, a rock concert, or a picnic dinner; just a hunger to learn of Him.

We can observe that simple principle at work throughout the book of Acts. Wherever we see Christians being made, we see 3 things happening. First and foremost, Jesus was preached. (See Acts 8:4-5, 12, 35) The reason being is that He is at the heart of what the gospel is (1 Cor 15:1-4). And secondly, as the gospel was proclaimed, people were convicted of their sin. In Acts 2 we read of the awesome gospel sermon Peter preached to his fellow Jews during Pentecost. He drove home to them the fact that they killed the Messiah they had waited centuries for! He didn't pussyfoot around trying to give them a better self-image, or a positive mental attitude, or a promise of a spaghetti dinner in a "fellowship hall!" He declared to them their sin and, most importantly, how to get past it by repentance and baptism. And finally, in every instance of the gospel being preached, we see that people were moved to make a decision: Either accept Christ obediently or reject Him. Again, there were no promises of a party or a good time. Rather, there was the bigger promise of sins forgiven and eternal life by living a life of willing obedience to the Son of God.

It is that simple message of repentance and obedience that we need to take to the world. In fact, it is the supreme mission of the church: "I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth." (1 Tim 3:15) The early church was not the pillar and support of the truth with egg hunts and parties; they simply proclaimed the life-saving message of the truth regarding Jesus Christ and His will for men. The trouble is, most "churches" (and even some churches of Christ) have forgotten what business they're supposed to be in. They offer entertainment, food, social programs, recreation of every kind; everything but the soul-saving gospel! We are in the business of truth and saving souls, not the entertainment business.

Let's ask the question again: Is the seed any good? Consider those who responded to it at Pentecost (Acts 2) or Lydia (Acts 16) or the Corinthians (Acts 18). For them, it was the only thing that mattered. It was all they needed and it's all we need today and to an honest heart, the seed will take root, blossom, and show fruit embodied as a faithful child of God.

Topic Page

Justification - The Theme Of Romans

Jay Taylor

The great theme of the epistle of Paul to the Romans is rightly stated in Romans 1:16-17: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith unto faith: as it is written, But the righteous shall live by faith.” The apostle Paul then proceeds to show that all men are in need of justification (1:18-3:20).

The Gentiles (Romans 1:18-32) are in need of justification because they rejected God (1:18-23) and went down the pathway of uncleanness (1:24-25), vile passions (1:26-27), and a reprobate mind (1:28-32). The Jews (2:17-3-8) are in need of justification because they were violators of God’s law (2:17-29) and displayed a lack of faith in God’s promises (3:1-8, esp. verse 3). Paul’s conclusion: “...for we before laid to the charge both of Jews and Greeks, that they are all under sin” (3:9, cf. 3:10-20).

How can man be justified if all are under sin? The apostle Paul answers this question in Romans 3:21-31. Men can be justified in the sight of God through faith in Jesus Christ. The careful Bible student will notice how many times Paul mentions “faith” in this section (cf. 3:22, 26, 27, 28, 30). God is the “justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus” (3:26). One can picture the Jewish reaction to this declaration. To them, justification came through being a Jew, circumcision, and the law of Moses, not through Jesus Christ.

Paul anticipates their objection. He asks, “Do we then make the law of none effect through faith?” His answer: “God forbid: nay, we establish the law” (3:31). That is, through our preaching that men are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, we are confirming the law. The law of Moses directed men to Jesus Christ. Paul would say to the churches of Galatia that “the law is become our tutor to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24). Paul, himself as a Jew, came to this realization. What was his reaction when he learned that man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ? He said, “even we believed on Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the law: because by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified” (Galatians 3:16).

To illustrate the fact that men are justified by faith, the apostle Paul mentions the example of Abraham (4:1-25). Abraham was justified apart from works of law (4:1-8, 13-15). He was justified before being circumcised (4:9-12). How could Abraham be justified apart from the law and before being circumcised? His faith was in God (Romans 4:16-25).

It behooves us to consider the meaning of faith at this time. In reference to Jesus, Thayer defines faith as “a conviction, full of joyful trust, that Jesus is the Messiah - the divinely appointed author of eternal salvation in the kingdom of God, conjoined with obedience to Christ” (Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 511). This is perfectly illustrated in the example of Abraham. When God commanded Abraham to offer his son Isaac upon the altar, the scripture says, “Thou seest that faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect; and the scripture was fulfilled which saith, And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness; and he was called the friend of God. Ye see that by works a man is justified and not only by faith” (James 2:22-24). Paul and James are in perfect harmony when speaking about how a man is justified. Man is justified by an obedient belief in Jesus Christ. Some might object and state that Paul is against works. Not so. Paul affirms that we are saved by works of obedience. When speaking of the judgment of God, Paul says that God “will render to every man according to his works: to them that by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and incorruption, eternal life” (Romans 2:6-7). Notice, it is those who seek for glory, honor, and incorruption that God will give eternal life. In Romans 6:17, Paul exclaims, “but thanks be to God, that, whereas ye were servants of sin, ye became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching whereunto ye were delivered.” What teaching were the Romans obedient to? The context determines the answer. Paul says that they “were baptized into Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:3-7). Abraham was justified in the sight of God because he had an obedient faith. What about us today? Paul says, “Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it (righteousness) was reckoned unto him; but for our sake also, unto whom it shall be reckoned, who believe on him that raised Jesus our Lord from the dead...” (Romans 4:24-25). When we render obedience to the gospel we are justified by grace through faith.

What are the results of justification? Paul answers this question in Romans 5:1-5. We have peace with God. At one time we were alienated from God and enemies of God because of our evil works (Colossians 1:21).

However, as a result of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (Romans 5:1-11) we can enjoy reconciliation with God (Romans 5:11).

Friends again with God! What a wonderful thought. This is theme of the Bible first announced in Genesis 3:15. This is the theme behind the promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12 and 15. This is the theme behind the law of Moses. This is the theme that the gospel reveals. The good news reveals how man can be just in the sight of God and have fellowship with Him (cf. Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-22; Galatians 2:16). In a marvelous way, the epistle of Paul to the Romans helps us see clearly the great theme of the Bible...justification.

The epistle of Paul to the Romans helps us also to see that great love that God has for us. He wants us to be justified. Paul says, "But God commendeth his own love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being justified by his blood, shall we be saved from the wrath of God through him" (Romans 5:8-9).

With these thoughts from the book of Romans in mind, we can clearly see the importance of justification. The choice of whether or not we will be justified in the sight of God is up to us. We can continue down the path of sin and be separated from God for all eternity (cf. Rom. 2:5, 8-9; 6:23) OR we can be justified and receive eternal life that is in Christ (cf. Rom. 6:23).

Jay Taylor

oakforestchurchofchrist@gmail.com

Plan of Salvation

The Plan of Salvation

By Jon W. Quinn

Plan #1

Announced by the apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to new believers in Christ who asked what they must do:

"Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (ACTS 2:38)

Plan #2

On the back page of a tract, sinners were urged to pray this prayer to be saved. This prayer is not found in the Bible; nor were alien sinners commanded to pray for their forgiveness.

The Sinner's Prayer:

"O' Lord, I accept that I am a sinner and that Jesus died for my sins. I now accept Him into my heart as Lord and Savior asking for your mercy and forgiveness in His name. Amen."

The editors of Expository Files are happy with plan #1 and thankful to the God of all grace for it. We cannot recommend Plan #2 at all, but will change our minds when this prayer can be shown to us in the Bible.

Final Page 13.1

Reflections on a New Year
By Jon W. Quinn

Warren and I are now entering our thirteenth year as co-editors of Expository Files. Neither of us are superstitious so we are not skipping the thirteenth volume and going directly from twelve to fourteen. We do not expect to suffer any ill effects as a consequence - "knock on wood!". There are now three main active sites on the internet where issues can be found, as well as a couple older sites with older issues but no new material being added. I want to thank our contributors and readers for their gracious support.

I sometimes think about how much better this world would be if we truly took advantage of all our opportunities. Technology has advanced and life could be so much more comfortable if we would let it. But instead, we have witnessed hatred turn these advances into weapons as the innocent are threatened every day. I know this weighs heavily on the minds of many, and it is upsetting that people can become so depraved as to behave that way. It

seems as if honor, compassion and kindness are sometimes such foreign concepts to many.

As we enter a new year, many will make this a time of reflecting, resolving and meditating. We do not and cannot know what this year holds for the world, the nation and our own selves. But we can be no better prepared for whatever may come than to walk by faith in God.

Discerning the Time

"There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven - a time to give birth, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to uproot what is planted. A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to tear down, and a time to build up. A time to weep, and a time to laugh..." (Ecclesiastes 3:1-4; cf. vss. 5-8).

Because of the nature of the world we live in, it is not always the right time to laugh, and it is not always the right time to build. Sometimes the thing that needs to be done is to weep, and sometimes to tear down instead of build. Often, the world builds where it needs to be tearing down, and tears down that which needs to be built. The Scriptures tell us, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes And clever in their own sight!" (Isaiah 5:20,21).

Life is made up of various times and events. It is no success to laugh when one ought to be weeping, or to continue to build when we ought to simply tear down and start over. One key to success is to know and respond to an event with the appropriate action. In our own nation, blessed so abundantly by God, there is a crying need to be able to tell the difference between what is good and what is evil. Moral confusion has weakened the nation from within, and destroyed the lives of so many.

God's Commandments Are Good for Us

"So the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God for our good always and for our survival, as it is today." (Deuteronomy 6:24).

Some people think it is hard being a Christian. In some ways they are right. It calls for more strength, courage and sacrifice. Dedication and discipleship go hand in hand.

But in other ways it is easier (Matthew 11:28-30). There are benefits that make us confident and give us peace and joy. Our lives are lifted up and given meaning and purpose in Jesus and the keeping of His commandments (1 John 5:3-4). The emotional and spiritual benefits of faith are real. Singing the song "I'm Happy Today" very simply tells why. Because "In Jesus Christ, I'm happy today, because He's washed, my sins away." Forgiveness brings hope, and hope brings confidence, peace and joy.

The Bible often portrays life as a journey. While on this journey, we must not lose sight of God. We are not at home in this world, but we have no hope beyond it except by faith (Hebrews 11:9-10; 13-14; 16). The best thing we can do for ourselves and our loved ones in this coming year is to fix "our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith." (Hebrews 12:2). He has already completed the journey. He knows how to get home. He is showing us the way. We had best listen to Him!

Have a happy and blessed new year... but more than that, let it be faithfully lived in Christ Jesus so it may take us homeward.