

Our purpose is to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints,” and to “prove all things; hold fast that which is good.”

OLD PATHS ADVOCATE

“To continue speaking the truth in love,” “endeavoring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace,” “keeping the ordinance as delivered.”

“Thus saith the Lord, ‘stand ye in the ways, and see and ask for the Old Paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest of your souls.’ (Jer. 6:16) “And they that be of Thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The Repairer of the Breach, The Restorer of Paths to Dwell in.” (Isa. 58:12).

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THE FAR COUNTRY

By *BILLY D. DICKINSON*

When Charles Dickens was once asked what he considered to be the best story in the English language, the 19th century novelist responded that it is the parable of the prodigal son. I dare say that anyone who has read it understands and appreciates that answer. Indeed, it has been called “the prince of parables” and “the greatest short story ever told.” However, the beauty of it involves more than mere literary form and how it flows from one character to the next. Its real significance is how it opens up our understanding to spiritual principles that lead to a deeper relationship with God and one another. It begins in a very simple way: “A certain man had two sons” (Luke 15:11)-- and from there Jesus weaved together a story that touches our hearts on so many different levels.

In this article we are interested in focusing on how the younger son “took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance in riotous living” (Luke 15:13). Yes, he left home (where he should have enjoyed his father’s care and protection) to dwell in a distant land where he undoubtedly came face to face with pagan practices and ungodly living. It is calculated that in Christ’s day some four million Jews lived outside of Palestine and only half a million remained in the homeland. At that time a young man might take a trip to Rome, Athens, or Corinth where the “night life” was in full bloom and the desires of the flesh could be fulfilled. Wanting to see for himself what was available in other lands, this young man made a terrible decision. With the rich imagery provided in this parable, let’s notice what the “far country” represents, what “riotous living” is and how the backslider can find his way back home.

WRONG DECISIONS FOR WRONG REASONS

The prodigal son didn’t just happen to find himself in a bad place by accident, but this was something he purposefully chose! That’s why the “far country” represents the world (1 John 2:15-16), a place not measured by distance as in the number of miles involved, but anywhere you are outside of God’s will. Furthermore, once you make that decision, it leads you further away from God and deeper into sin where the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life control your lifestyle. What the prodigal son thought was going to be a wonderful adventure turned out to be his worst nightmare.

Notice the following language: “And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country . . .” (Luke 15:13) Please observe that he didn’t just gather up enough clothes, possessions and money to get by for a short visit, but he intended to stay there permanently and never go home again. However, he was about to learn the hard way that the “far country” is a costly place to live and too high a price must be paid for low living. Prov. 13:15 declares that “the way of transgressors is hard.” That is true because the very nature of sin is destructive and never satisfies in a meaningful and lasting way. John Belushi, the famous comedian of SNL and movies, was a prime example of this. He was only 33 years old when he died in 1983 from an overdose of cocaine and heroin. Here is how the seductive dangers of cocaine has been described: “It can do no harm and it can drive you insane; it can give you status in society and it can ruin your career; it can make you the life of the party and it can turn you into a loner; it can be an elixir for high living and a potion for death.” Too bad John Belushi couldn’t see how cocaine was actually destroying him. Likewise, if the prodigal son could have understood

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Editorial

**SURPRISE! SURPRISE!
 CHURCH ATTENDANCE MAKES YOU HEALTHY**

By CARL M. JOHNSON

According to Tyler J. VanderWeele, professor of Epidemiology at Harvard University, “Americans are rapidly giving up on church, but our minds and bodies will pay the price” (Christianity Today, Nov. 2021). VanderWeele provides enough documentation to distract a computer in order to support his conclusion that “people find their social and personal lives improved—sometimes their lives even physically saved—when they go to church often.”

A number of large, well-designed research studies have found that regular church attendance is associated with greater longevity of life, less depression, less suicide, less smoking, less substance abuse, better survival from cancer and cardiovascular diseases, less divorce, greater social support, greater meaning in life, and greater life satisfaction (VanderWeele 3).

In spite of the above, Americans are rapidly giving up on church attendance. In 2019, Gallup reported that only 36 percent of Americans view organized religion with “a great deal of confidence.” The decline of confidence in churches has been accompanied by steep recent declines in both church membership and attendance. Barna Group found that 10 years ago, 43 percent of Americans said they went to church every week. By February of 2020, the number had dropped 14 percentage points to 29 percent.

When asked why they seldom or never attend church, a large share of professed Christians say they prefer to “go it alone, moving their faith into quarters so private that even the church is not allowed in” (VanderWeele 2).

This sentiment perfectly expresses the religious spirit of our time. Who can forget Andrew Sullivan’s rant in a cover story for Newsweek magazine? (“Christianity in Crisis: Christianity has been destroyed by politics, priests, and get-rich evangelists.”) When I first read the title I thought, “Amen!” Who would argue that the church has not suffered in the eyes of the world because

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IDENTIFYING MARKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH PART 3

By MELVIN BLALOK

Editor's note: We continue to offer articles from a series by Brother Melvin Blalok of Cleburne, Texas - Greg Gay

In the previous articles we have written concerning the identifying marks of the New Testament church. We found that the church revealed in the New Testament is composed of baptized believers who have confessed their faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, Acts 8:36-38, Acts 2:38-41. We have seen that baptism is essential for salvation.

Jesus commissioned His Apostles to carry the gospel to all the world. It is recorded in Mark's Gospel; "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," Mk. 16:15-16. We are, therefore not surprised by the Apostle Peter's words in Acts 2:38, where he told these believers, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins..." Acts 2:38. This momentous occasion marked the beginning of the Lord's church.

We find this same Apostle commanding the first Gentile converts to be baptized in water, Acts 10:47-48. Later we read from this same Apostle, "...when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" 1 Pet. 3:20-21. This inspired Apostle continued to teach that baptism is essential to salvation, just as he was instructed by Jesus.

Saul of Tarsus met with the same requirements given by the disciple Ananias, "And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord," Acts 22:16. We have seen in the scriptures that baptism is a requirement for salvation. It is for the remission of sins. It is in baptism that our sins are washed away. Everyone in the first century who became a member of the Lord's church was baptized to receive salvation. Jude showed in his epistle that

we share a common salvation: "Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." Jude 3. Members of the New Testament church share a common salvation. Originally published January 4, 2021. 214 Pearl St., Cleburne, TX 76031 (817) 641-1668 melvinblalock@sbcglobal.net

SUGGESTIONS ON SINGING

By JOHNNY ELMORE

Brother Johnny Elmore has taught Singing Schools for many years and most consider him to be one of best song leaders in our brotherhood. In this article, from the May 1982 issue of the Old Paths Advocate, Johnny offers some suggestions on singing, focusing on the worshiper and the song leader. I personally do not believe that there is any part of our worship that is treated with less respect than our singing. Congregational leaders should make a concerted effort to improve the singing.
- Rick Martin

Having spent the greater portion of my life trying to sing and teach the gospel, and because I love the church and singing, I offer a few suggestions on singing. If they merit consideration, I hope they will be taken to heart.

Suggestions for Worshipers

(1) Remember that singing is worship: Everyone who seeks to please God should sing, not just the "best voices." If I have a command to sing, then so do you, if you claim membership in the church. Some who would not think of omitting the contribution or the communion refrain from singing at their own wills. But singing is worship commanded by God and anyone who can talk can sing with the spirit and the understanding although he may not be able to carry a tune. The heart is the instrument designated by God to be used (Eph. 5:19). If every member of the church would put forth his best effort, it would help to dispel the notion that we are merely spectators, and not participants in worship. Singing is not a preliminary to the beginning of the service. It is not simply a signal to start the service. It is related that F.B. Srygley often remarked that in days of yore, many churches of his acquaintance used song to "doodle them in." Perhaps it is that mentality that causes people to think nothing of "trooping in" during

the singing when they would not think of doing so when prayer is in progress.

(2) Learn something about singing: Since we are commanded to sing, it seems reasonable that we should be willing to learn something about how to carry out the command. We have a number of young men in the church who would be able to teach us something about singing if given the opportunity. (I am suggesting supporting this with personal funds, not church funds). But it is a fact that the majority will not attend instructions in singing. I believe I would, even if I were convinced I could not learn, just to set a good example for our children. Some do not seem to believe it necessary to learn anything about singing. They say that surely, we can carry out the command of God without learning music. But have you ever thought that we are also commanded to read God's word (I Tim. 4:13), and that we have to learn to read to carry out this command? Friends, I want to be qualified to join in the "new song" before the throne of God when life on earth is over. But the Bible said that "no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand" (Rev. 14:13). I believe I can show that number represents the church on earth. I understand that the trials of the Christian life are inferred, but have you ever thought that it might be necessary to learn to sing and to learn to love to sing in order to "learn that song"?

(3) Remember that God requires our best: God has always required the best in sacrifices offered to him. Under the Old Testament, He would not accept leftovers, odds and ends and animals for sacrifice which were lame and sick and ready to die anyway (Mal. 1:13). Since this is true, do you honestly think God will accept anything less than the best that we can offer when it comes to spiritual sacrifices under the New Testament? Our "sacrifice of praise," which the divine writer identified as "the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name" (Heb. 13:15), must be the best that we can do. When it comes to our singing, have we done our best? Think about it! Can we honestly say that we have done our best? Personally, I think there is room for improvement.

Suggestions for Song Leaders

(1) The song leader is responsible for leading: Paul asked, "Are all apostles?" (1 Cor. 12:29), and I ask: "Are all song leaders?" The obvious answer to both

questions is "No." A man who stutters or has a severe speech impediment is never asked or encouraged to preach. Then by what stretch of the imagination could we encourage a person who is deaf both to tone quality and pitch to think he could lead the singing? A leader who is worthy of the name will have a sense of rhythm and pitch. It is the responsibility of the song leader to "lead" the congregation. Many times, those who call themselves song leaders are actually "song starters." Surely it is not too much to expect the song leader to employ some of the basic rudiments of music.

(2) The song leader is responsible for tempo and rhythm: When we see situations in which the congregation literally drags the songs to a spiritual death, we must say that this is the song leader's fault. When any congregation over a period of time drags its singing, the leader is the blame. The song leader should set the tempo and alter it only if it is more effective to do so. If he is going to "beat the time," which I recommend, he should learn the basic conductor's beat for each time signature and use it gracefully. If in doubt, let him practice before a mirror or ask his wife.

(3) The song leader is responsible for the pitch: If he is a tenor, he should know that he may pitch the songs too high, and put the congregation in untold agony. If he is a bass, he may pitch the song too low. God commanded us to sing, not screech, croak, or discord.

(4) The song leader is responsible for letting the people know the number of the song and the number of the stanzas: He should announce the number loudly enough for all to hear. I have seen services disrupted by people trying to discover the number because it was announced inaudibly. Also, the song leader should not keep the congregation guessing as to which stanzas will be sung. If not announced, the number of each stanza can easily be indicated by using the fingers. (Of course, all this is meaningless if the congregation never watches the leader). How will the song leader be able to do all this? Training. Just as we do not expect to teach without preparation, even so we should not expect to do our best unless we prepare.

(5) The song leader is responsible for the selection of songs: Some songs which may be appropriate for funerals or gospel meetings may not be the best for worship. We can expect some new songs to be sung.

It is bad when every child in the house can turn to the number before the song leader announces it because the leader has only one that he sings. New songs can add life to our singing. Old songs should not be excluded entirely. The old familiar hymns can be conducive to more spiritual singing because minds are freed from the printed page to concentrate on the words. Careful selection would help avoid some errors. For example, I have heard leaders select “O Why Not Tonight” as an invitation song for Sunday morning. I have heard leaders select “True Worship” for Wednesday evening, and then sing the phrase. “Here we bring our off’ring on this holy day,” with great gusto. The best songbook in the world is no guarantee against such careless errors.

(6) The song leader is responsible for starting on time: The Bible says: “Not slothful in business” (Rom. 12:11). Most all preachers like for the song leader who has the invitation song to sit near the front and begin immediately when the sermon is over. Perhaps some would disagree with me on these points, but I believe all will agree that good singing is a great advantage. How long has it been since your congregation concentrated on improving the singing?

CLOSER THAN THEY MAY APPEAR

By BARNEY OWENS

July 1943 - February 2019

“Objects May be Closer than They Appear.” Likely, you have noticed that statement printed on the right mirror of your automobile. Unless we pay strict and unusual attention to this admonition the mirror designed to help us avoid an accident, may in fact become the cause of a collision. The mirror is constructed in such a way as to take a wider view of the highway, however in doing so, the objects reflected are made smaller. Therefore, are closer than they appear to be as we use the mirror for a gauge.

Having read the inscription many times in the past, while driving on a nearby Interstate Highway the other day it occurred to me for the first time that there is some spiritual benefit to be gained by variously applying this statement to some real situations. Some of the things presented for our consideration in Scripture-to warn us lest we fall prey to them, may in fact be closer than they appear.

Temptation may Be closer Than it may Appear

Paul points us back to the Israelites as examples of things we should not pursue. Who would have thought these people could be led away from the God in so many ways so quickly. Over and again, the Lord forgave and showed them the right way when they failed to honor Him. Repeatedly they gave way to sin because temptation was closer than it appeared. Writing to the Corinthians chapter ten of the first epistle he declared, “these things were our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted... Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents.” (I Cor. 10:6, 9). man is endowed with natural desires (lusts) that have been put within us for our well-being. These may be useful, helpful, and even necessary to complying with God’s will in various matters. However, when these are turned toward things forbidden by the Lord that becomes an entirely different matter. The Lord tempts us in the path of our duty as we might tempt (try) a servant by frequent experiments before we can place confidence in him. Satan tempts us to depart from our duty to God tempting us by the weakness of our principles, to give way to the violence of our passions. “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man” (1 Cor. 10:13). In James chapter one, disciples are exhorted relative to Satan’s diabolical workings. “every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lusts, and enticed (lured away with bait).” (Js. 1:14). At the very moment when we think temptation can have nil effects upon us is the exact time that we have fallen prey to the Devil. “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” (I Cor.10:12). When we have considered it all-the whole of the Christian life is the bearing up against temptations and prevailing over them. It is by means of the trials placed before us in this world that we are able to evidence our love and obedience to God. Through temptations that we overcome, we ourselves are able to see our fitness to be members of His Kingdom. Temptation may be closer than it appears.

Being overtaken in a sin may Be closer Than it may Appear

“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” (Gal. 6:1). The idea presented by the word “overtaken” is of a

surprise blunder or fault. It is not as though one planned or schemed to engage in some iniquitous act, but the thing happened in a way not expected. In a moment of weakness or indifference evil presented itself and wounded the soul. As we look at the verse, some helpful lessons come forth. The spiritual that was entrusted with restoration refers to those “spiritually gifted” or those possessing spiritual gifts. Since they occupied a position that normal Christians (and all of us today) did not possess, there was the possibility that they would be exalted in heart overmuch. So, the Apostle strikes at a tender spot telling them to act in meekness as the possibility of their being overcome was equally true as with the troubled soul that they were to assist. Now if these so “gifted” must take heed or guard themselves lest they fall, surely there is a need for us to take ample precautions. Restore is a term that was used in the nautical world in reference to fishing nets that were torn and in need of mending. Once they were mended they had been restored or functionally were as good as new. It was also used in the medical profession of one whose bone had been broken and those qualified would “set” the bone. It was then usable to the patient as though it had not been injured. The soul overtaken in a fault “having sinned” can be restored to his rightful place of service and worship and was as a newborn soul.

Why do we allow ourselves to be surprised in a fault? There are many factors that could be named a few of which I can point out.

1st, we may become careless in our Christian life. Scripture suggests that we take heed to “live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world” (Tit. 2:12). Like some other things in life, we fail to take this admonition as seriously as we should and failing to take proper precautions to avoid the snares of Satan (failing to realize being overcome is closer than it may appear), we look up and behold we are surprised in a fault. When a person becomes careless in his work accidents are likely to happen when they could have been avoided. As Christians, when we develop sloppy habits in praying and reading God’s word, we fail to cultivate character traits that draw us closer to God. We are then prime targets for the devil to surprise us.

2nd, ignorance is a certain way by which some are surprised in a fault. By this, I mean that people fail to gain information about the operations of Satan. Failing

to learn his methods can be fatal. Paul wrote, “lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices.” (II Cor. 2:11). That should be true of all of us. “See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise... be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.” (Ephesians. 5:15,17). We cannot be satisfied with what we already know, we need to press onward and learn everything we can about the Lord’s will to keep ourselves free from the yoke of sin, otherwise we will be surprised in a fault.

3rd, dangerous pride relying on self-sufficiency to combat sin is a mark of those that do not realize how close they are to being overtaken in a fault. “Pride goeth before destruction” (Prov. 16:18). Pride is like an inflated balloon that the touch of a pin can burst. When one is full of himself the slightest prick of sin will bring a surprising defalcation. Weaknesses of others may not be ours but the possibility of being overtaken is common to all.

The last Breath We shall Take may Be closer Than We Think

‘...For what is your life? It is even as a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.’ (Js. 4:14). The brevity of life is variously described in Scripture. In each generation, God has laid before men that the promise of extended life, although desired and sought by all is not within the reach of man. Life is described as a vapor or literally a mist, which is here, then it is gone. When a mist is heaviest and apparently will not dissipate, it is at that very moment that it is gone forevermore. ‘Tis true that we may do things that retard our bodies, brings grief because of disease, and sorrow in unexpected and youthful death. There is little man can do to remain on this earth longer than his allotted time. Some people can see death “knocking at their door,” but the greater number of us experience the unexpected and uninvited to take our spirits away leaving a dead body behind, therefore, ever before our mind must be the thought that death is closer than it may appear.

Because that is true James admonishes his readers, “therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.” (Js. 4:17). To fail in our duty, to procrastinate, to slouch in taking advantage of an opportunity is sin because we may never have the

privilege of such circumstances again—we as a vapor or mist may cease to exist in the present body. Anciently the Greeks described opportunity by picturing the following. A young man desiring a wife would be given an opportunity to possess the girl of his dreams. He must stand at the corner of a building, which he could not see around and wait. The girl wearing soft-soled shoes would pull her hair in front of her face and walk by the building past the young man. As he stood there, he could not see her coming, he could not hear her walking and at first glimpse he must reach out and grab her hair. A moment's hesitation meant that she would pass him by and is lost to him forever. Death is like this young girl; it comes silently and softly and when it comes all opportunity is forever gone. With that before us the bible warns:

1st, one should become a Christian at the earliest opportunity. “behold, now is the accepted time: behold now is the day of salvation.” (II Cor. 6:2). Many today cast these words aside, think of them as idle or openly rebel before the plain commandments of the Lord. They seem to think they will live forever failing to realize that their last breath may be closer than appears. When the Gospel was preached in New Testament times, hearers did not hesitate to claim the salvation provided by Jesus' death and resurrection. On Pentecost those who gladly received the word were baptized (Acts 2:41). When the people of Samaria believed they were baptized (Acts 8:12). When the eunuch approached water, he requested Philip to baptize him (Acts 8:36-39). The jailer at Philippi was baptized straightway (immediately,) between midnight and one AM. Saul of Tarsus was chided for “tarrying” and was immediately baptized. Considering the brevity of life how can we linger in the ways of the world?

2nd, exercise care to stand steadfast in the way of the Lord. “take heed brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God, but exhort one another daily, while it is called today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” (Heb. 3:12-13). Jesus promised that He would prepare a place for His disciples and would return for us (Jn. 14:1-4). We acknowledge His promise by dwelling in Him and trusting Him as the WAY (Vs. 6). While the world may bring us trouble even because we serve Christ, we will not give up on His promises. “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer behold the devil

shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall suffer tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life’ (Rev. 2:10). It is much easier to adopt the heart of worldlings and have a mind for this life only, however, as Christians “we walk by faith, not by sight” We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord. Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad” (II Cor 5:7-10). We know death may be closer than it appears. One's last breath may be closer than it appears. One man realized the truth of this lesson too late. Jesus said “in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments.” (Lk. 16:23). His fate was sealed and the chances of changing his fate were nil. His suffering and anguish was multiplied as his heart was set upon those he loved who were pursuing the same course he had taken. He desired that Abraham would send Lazarus “to my father's house: For I have five brethren: that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.” (Vs. 27-28). many have escorted the body of a dear loved one to a place to await the Lord's coming who had failed to make preparation for that meeting. Tear-stained eyes, an empty seat and a broken heart do not prevail at that great day. Friends leave us, neighbors are taken away, but when those we love pass into the realm of the unseen words do not come to express the anguished heart. When we lose a loved one, we enter the feelings of David upon losing his child. In his sadness, he said, “can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.” (II Sam. 12:23). There is but a breath between our loved ones and death, therefore we should move swiftly to bring them into the fold of God—the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. As the writer of old expressed it, “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.” (Heb. 9:27). Paul in speaking of judgment in an aforementioned passage (II Cor. 5:10), quickly added “Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men... “(Vs. 11). The last breath any of us may take may be closer than it appears. read, receive, learn, acknowledge, and live.



THE FAR COUNTRY ...continued from page one

what the far country had in store for him, he would have staid home!

A HEART PROBLEM

The younger son's mind had been in that ungodly environment long before his body was! It began with a heart problem, a longing to indulge in everything his sinful heart craved and desired, and that's why he wanted to get away from his father's presence and godly influence. One man described it like this: "The far country is not hard to find. You can enter it right where you are. You do not have to go to Las Vegas. It is a state of mind, of the heart and of the affections. It is rebellion against the word and will of God." That's right! Leaving home for him was more than just being released from a mere historical place-- it was the denial of the spiritual reality of who he was as a descendant of Abraham (one in a covenant relationship with God).

After he had "wasted his substance in riotous living" and was destitute, that's when he hit rock bottom by taking the job of feeding swine (Luke 15:14-16). The word "wasted" can be used to refer to the scattering of grain by winnowing. In other words, it was as if he took his inheritance, something that should have been of great value to him, and he "threw it to the wind." That's what happens when people set their hearts on earthly things to the neglect of spiritual things, proving that they really don't know what is important in both life and eternity. Like the prodigal son in the parable, there are those today who need to come to their senses before it's too late.

RETURNING HOME

The prodigal son did not have the ability or the resolve to go home until "he came to himself" (Luke 15:17). Now that he was able to see the far country for what it was, he purposed in his heart to go to his father, confess his sinfulness and beg for forgiveness. There may be someone reading this article who has gone back to a life of sin and left the Lord and His church. Don't wait until the judgment day to figure out that the world has nothing to offer you that is lasting and beneficial to the

soul. Remember that "the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17/ NKJV). The faithful Christian who is minding spiritual things should feel out of place in this old world as surely as that younger son did feeding the hogs!

Dear brethren, do we sometimes look at the world and think to ourselves that we don't belong here? Do we feel out of place when we realize that we don't speak the same kind of language they do, we dress differently, the way they look at things doesn't make sense to us and their values are not ours? We should feel that way sometimes. After all, we are described as "strangers and pilgrims" who are to "abstain from fleshly lusts" (1 Pet. 2:11). As I sojourn through this world, I must not allow the devil to deceive me into thinking that anything of a temporal nature is worth losing my soul over. "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul," Jesus asked in Matt. 16:26, "Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"

In the 1980's there was a popular police drama called "Hill Street Blues." In a precinct in New York City, it always started in the "ready room" with roll call. After that everyone was ready to go on patrol, and the old Sergeant would give them one last piece of advice-- "Hey, let's be careful out there!" Brethren, that's what we must do as we deal with a world that is seeking to lead us astray. Remember, too, that our Father in heaven is merciful and forgiving, The main point of the parable is that when the backslider repents and seeks reconciliation with God, there is joy and rejoicing in heaven-- "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:23)

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SURPRISE! SURPRISE! ...continued from page two

of such shameful shenanigans by people claiming to be Christians? Sullivan goes on to say, however, that the remedy for such situations is to quit the church and follow Jesus individually. In other words, “From now on it is just going to be Jesus and me, and I’m forgetting about the church.”

Sullivan’s angry rant is full of overstatement, misstatement, and misunderstanding. He has pretty much given up on organized Christianity. He believes in the divinity of Jesus and His resurrection from the dead, and he wants to follow the ethics of Jesus and deepen his love for God and neighbor. He believes, however, that those things cannot be found in the church.

A few years ago I saw an Internet video that went “viral” (over 15 million views at last count) called, “Why I Hate Religion but Love Jesus.” The quality of the production is excellent and the performer, Jeff Bethke, is a good-looking, articulate young man. I can see why the video has appealed to so many viewers.

The message in the video is virtually the same as that of Sullivan’s in Newsweek. Bethke says that Jesus came to abolish religion, and that the church came along and re-instituted it. He adds that now we need to be liberated from the shackles of religion in order to be able to worship Jesus “freely.”

These guys represent a growing sentiment in religion today, which includes some of our own brethren. Several years ago a brother in Christ told me that the remedy for brotherhood problems is to abandon the brotherhood. He said many folks have tried the church and found it wanting, and they are just not going to take it anymore. They are either meeting in small groups in homes and apartments for prayer and Bible study, sometimes calling themselves “house churches,” or they are going it alone to pursue spirituality and Jesus without the church.

Of course, the primary purpose of corporate worship is not to lower your blood pressure, but VanderWeele says those who “go it alone” will not receive the same beneficial effects of health and well-being as those who attend church services regularly with other believers (4).

God has ordained that His people are to function within “the group,” (i.e. the church) and functioning within a group is never an easy process. The Israelites praised, squabbled, failed, and repented together in a seemingly endless cycle. Christians in Paul’s day alternately thrilled and broke his heart over and over again. However, they kept at it, and with every try Paul grew more passionate about the ragtag crew of notoriously fallible humans who so thoroughly are the church. Striving to convey the profound connection between Jesus and the people who gather in His name, Paul employs only the most intimate metaphors—we are Christ’s bride (Eph. 5:23-24), or His very body (Col. 1:18), and yet some people want to separate the groom from His bride, or decapitate the Head (Eph. 5:23) from His body!

God knows we cannot develop into the kind of spiritual people He wants us to be if we isolate ourselves from others who are moving toward the same goal. Therefore, HE adds every saved person to a community of believers, the church (Acts 2:47).

“Community” requires meeting together with flesh and blood folks whom I cannot “block” or “unfriend” should they become annoying. It means getting close enough to hug and to arm wrestle, to build and sometimes hold each other up, even as we risk letting each other down. Now, we catch another glimpse of the manifold wisdom of God when we understand that such interaction that occurs during regular church attendance has a tremendous positive impact upon our general health and wellness. To God be the glory! (Cf. Rom. 12:10; 13:8; 14:13; Gal. 5:15, 17, 26; 6:1-2; Eph. 4:2, 32; Heb. 10:24-25; etc.).

FAITH ONCE DELIVERED

By JOE NORTON

When Jude writes to the saints about the salvation they all share, he affirms a fact that has stood the test of time and still stands firmly today:

Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints (verse 3).

The “faith” he speaks about is the complete system of faith that was preached in pre-cross times and that

Jesus sealed with His blood when He died on the cross. We stand under this “faith” today, and it still controls our lives if we have submitted to its redeeming power. This faith, first proclaimed by the apostles, equips us for every good work and gives us all things that pertain to life and godliness (Titus 3:1; 2 Peter 1:3).

Because of renewed challenges to this faith in recent years, faithful men of God must be firm, shouting from the roof tops that we stand with these great men from New Testament times: we stand with them in contending for the faith.

This “faith” is under attack, and it is under attack primarily from those who say we need to change the way we understand the word of God. At least this is the basic principle through which they levy many challenges against the “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”

Basic to these challenges is the idea that we need a new method of interpreting the bible. This call for a new method indicates there is something wrong with the old method—that is, that over the past centuries we have had flawed methods of interpretation. If this is the case, then all of our brethren from the past are lost because they did not know how to interpret the Bible properly.

Rampant in the religious world is this idea that the old method of scriptural interpretation is outdated, restrictive, and judgmental. This idea is now among us. And it is wreaking a wave of disunity that we have not seen for many years, if ever. And it is more far reaching and damaging today because of the sophisticated means of communication, primarily the Internet.

The following lists are given to help show the differences between the two methods of interpretation. They are not exhaustive lists, but they include major tenets of each central to the “old” method of interpretation are these precepts:

- All scripture is equally inspired; thus, all of the New Testament is relevant for us today, not just portions of it (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
- The scriptures provide authority for everything we do either by command, example, or necessary inference (Colossians 3:17).
- “The faith” that was delivered is applicable to all people

in every age of time. The New Testament transcends cultural and time barriers (Jude 3; 1 Corinthians 4:17).

- The scriptures are accepted as literal unless it makes no sense to do so. When a statement involves an impossibility, only then do we look for a logical, figurative meaning, consistent with all other scriptural teaching on that subject
- There is one correct interpretation of the scripture. “... no scripture is of any private interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20).
- Bible silence forbids.
- The New Testament law is in effect until Jesus returns. By contrast, precepts of the new method of interpretation include the following:
 - Some portions of scripture were the thoughts of man and were culturally generated for a select group of people.
 - The words of Jesus are of greater value than other writings in the new Testament. Only Jesus’ words are included in the doctrine of Christ (fellowship is based solely on a common belief in the virgin birth, and the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus).
 - Command, example, and necessary inference invoke human reasoning; and where human reasoning is involved, we are prone to err.
- Bible silence permits; that is, if the Bible does not directly condemn something, it is allowed. We can do what we want as long as it does not violate an explicit command.
- The scriptures are an expression of the love of God instead of a book containing His commandments for mankind.

If the new method of interpretation is correct, consider some of the dilemmas we face:

- If portions of scripture were culturally generated and not intended for all people of all times, we will have a difficult time determining which portions apply to our lives today.
- If Jesus’ words are all that matter, other writers of the New Testament were not necessary and their writings did not need to be included in the faith given once for all.
- The concept that human reasoning is prone to err and must thus be eliminated cannot be found in scripture and was arrived at by use of human reasoning. It is a self-contradicting theory.
- If bible silence permits, the sky is the limit. We can have instrumental music, many cups on the Lord’s table,

multiple communion services, divided bible classes-the list is long.

- If the scriptures are an expression of God's love instead of a book containing God's commands, we should regard the contents as suggestions of a lover and not as commands from a king.

Essentially the new method of biblical interpretation results in a new gospel. Paul preaches against such in 1:8: "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed." If we no longer accept that the word of God means what it says, we have no hope of achieving the unity for which Jesus prayed in John 17; and, more importantly, we fall under Paul's condemnation here in Galatians.

In the end, two important questions arise: Can we understand the scriptures and Does God mean what He says?

If the scriptures are understandable, God expects us to understand and to obey them. If they are not understandable, either they do not matter, or God is out to deceive us. If we accept that God means what He says, we must accept all He says and not just the portion of our choosing.

Jesus says, "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

The writer of Hebrews says, "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword..." (Hebrews 4:12).

How grateful we are that Jude sent the words he did to beloved brethren and that Paul gave such strong admonition as he did to the Ephesians when he told them to "be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might" (6:10). With this admonition goes the assurance that it can be done. Our strength is called into play at this moment in time. The cause needs us to be strong-the Lord needs us to be strong as we carry His banner and withstand the forces of evil that threaten the church today.



*Don and Pat King
June 17, 1962*

Field Report

Rick Martin teacherrmartin@gmail.com It has been a while since my last report to the OPA. I have been limited by recent back surgery. We had a great meeting with Kevin Presley. He did his usual great preaching. He then returned in August for our Annual Singing. We had one of the best singings we have ever had. We have a group of teenage girls from the Piedmont, AL congregation who can really sing some great alto. It is wonderful to see young people who are interested in singing and using their abilities for God. As of recent I have heard Cullen Smith, Joe Hisle, Jimmy Cating, Carl Johnson, and Wayne Fussell at various congregations in the south, All of these men did an excellent job. We continue to support "Let the Bible Speak" TV program with Kevin Presley here at home. We appreciate the help of the Napoleon, AL congregation in this effort. Our normal time is 7:30 AM on Sunday morning, but evidently the TV station is so impressed by the program that they re-air it on Wednesday nights at 8:30PM for no charge. Please pray for the work in this area and all over the world. May God bless His people everywhere.

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WALKS THROUGH THE BIBLE...

WHAT A RIDICULOUS SITUATION!

By JERRY DICKINSON

And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed the swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and am no more worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of the hired servants.' And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.'" (Luke 15:13-20)

The church at McGregor, Texas is planning a celebration of the life and preaching career of Wayne McKamie this coming weekend. Billy Wilson asked if I would preach Saturday evening and Sunday and then after the services several will give tributes to Wayne, and there are some video messages that brethren have recorded for the occasion. We are expecting lots of people from around the country to be in attendance and it should be awesome. I started thinking about what I should preach for such an occasion and I decided to preach three "tribute" sermons. Wayne preached a series of sermons on the parables of Jesus in 1978 in Wichita, Kansas and a book of sermons was published from that series in 1980. I bought the book when it was first published, read it, and then put it on my bookshelf.

I took the book down and began to reread it and was enthralled by the sermons. I told some that I had forgotten, somehow, just how great a preacher Wayne was! I decided to use Wayne's sermons as the basis for my messages for the meeting. What a blessing this study and preparation has been for me! I know Wayne will be somewhat embarrassed by all the tribute and praise he is going to hear this weekend, but I am going to emphasize to him, and everyone else there, that we are the ones who are really being blessed, and encouraged, by the tributes we pay to him and his long preaching career. He signed my copy of the sermon book, "To my good friend and fellow preacher – Preach the Word!" Vintage Wayne McKamie!

One of the sermons that I am going to use from his book is "The Parable Of The Prodigal Son." Wayne notes that when the prodigal son came to himself the first thing he thought about was the servants of his father back home. The son was starving and the servants back home, he thought, had food enough and to spare. Then Wayne in his inimitable style exclaims, "What a ridiculous situation!" I think I laughed out loud as I was reading that, and I could hear Wayne say that in his deep, elegant voice. "What a ridiculous situation!" Indeed I thought, Wayne is right, it was a ridiculous situation the younger son found himself in. He had it made when he lived at home with plenty to eat, shoes on his feet, a beautiful robe to keep him warm, and the signet ring on his finger that bespoke his place as an heir to his father and all his father possessed. Now, down in the muddy hog pen, he is shoeless, bereft of his robe, his ring long gone (perhaps sold to pay for food during the famine before he glued himself to the man who sent him out to feed his hogs) and he is starving not even allowed to eat what the swine eat. What a ridiculous situation for the son of his father! The servants he thinks – they are better off than me. All of this he realizes when he comes to himself. Oh, the madness of sin!

I kept thinking of Wayne's phrase, "What a ridiculous situation!" and how many times it has been repeated in the Bible and even today. Talk about having it made, Adam and Eve lived in paradise and had communion with God every day, but they listened to the voice of the Devil and were thrust out of the garden. Cherubim guarded the entrance with flaming swords so they could never again eat of the tree of life. Outside the beautiful paradise garden God had put them in, forever. What a ridiculous situation. Oh, the madness of sin!

What a distressing picture. David going up over the Mount of Olives with no shoes on his feet and his head covered. All those with him have their heads covered, and everyone is weeping as they walk. One angry man even throws stones at David and curses him as he passes by. What is going on? Absalom has raised an army and rebelled against his father David, and David abandons the city and it is a pitiful procession that leaves with him. David knows, of course, that at least in part his situation is a result of his own sin and mistakes. But, what a ridiculous situation for the King of Israel! It is always so when we find ourselves in the far country, right?

Years ago in Marietta, Georgia I sat in the living room of an elderly couple who were out of duty and the man told me he did not think God would forgive him for something he had done. His wife sat weeping beside him, saying she knew that if she died that night she would be lost. I told them that God will forgive any sin if we repent and confess, but he kept saying God would not forgive him and she just kept crying. They never did repent and return to duty. What a ridiculous situation! God's mercy is greater than all our sin, and it is available to everyone who will trust and obey, and yet there is the madness of sin. There is the journey to the far country from which some never return. The young prodigal came to himself. His father was waiting at home for him. Our Father waits and longs to welcome sinners home. Can anything be more ridiculous than staying in the pig pen of sin. It is time to arise and head for home!