

We Must Obey God – Not Men

Written on: February 28, 2022

Article by: Dave Knutson

Most of us would confess that we pay little attention to the legislative activity of our federal government. We often assume that those in positions of responsibility will preserve and defend the rights of all of their citizens as set out in the Canadian Constitution. We also have the right to expect, that both houses of parliament will act with due diligence and not in haste, when researching and debating matters pertinent to the drafting of new legislation.

Neither of these two expectations were met when Bill C-4¹ was introduced to the House of Commons on November 29, 2021 and summarily passed on December 2, 2021. The Senate failed in its role as the ‘house of sober second thought’, passing the bill into law on December 7. As of January 30, 2022, it is now part of the criminal code of Canada.

Process counts.

If there was ever a legislative equivalent of a Kangaroo court, this was it. There was no debate: no weighting of evidence, no consideration of arguments to the contrary and no effort to pre-test it’s constitutionality. See: (<https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/how-rights-protected/guide-canadian-charter-rights-freedoms.html#a2b>)

The government had made up its mind in advance and by drafting this very vaguely worded amendment, it accomplished at least three things.

- It scored ‘political correctness points’ without breaking a sweat.
- It shifted the hard work of sorting it all out to the courts where the expense of defense and the fear of trial is born by the accused.
- And by drafting a criminal amendment whose precise meaning and application is very unclear, it sets out to intimate and silence any whose beliefs and activities might cross a legal line – whose precise location, no one knows.

Before you read on, let me encourage you to read a copy of this bill at:

https://www.parl.ca/Content/Bills/441/Government/C-4/C-4_4/C-4_4.PDF

Sending you to this link shortens my article and safeguards against misrepresentation on my part by encouraging you to read the bill for yourself.

Bill C-4 criminalizes anyone providing or advertising what it calls ‘conversion therapy’. **It defines conversion therapy as:** “A practice, treatment or service designed to

(b) change a person’s gender identity to cisgender;

- (c) change a person's gender expression so that it conforms to the sex assigned to the person at birth;
- (d) repress or reduce non-heterosexual attraction or sexual behaviour;
- (e) repress a person's non-cisgender gender identity; or
- (f) repress or reduce a person's gender expression that does not conform to the sex assigned to the person at birth.

For greater certainty, this definition does not include a practice, treatment or service that relates to the exploration or development of an integrated personal identity — such as a practice, treatment or service that relates to a person's gender transition — and that is not based on an assumption that a particular sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression is to be preferred over another.

This definition is intentionally broad, failing to distinguish between:

- Practices that rely on information, persuasion and an appeal to moral values from those that are authoritarian, power based and coercive to effect forced compliance.

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- It also fails to distinguish between the treatment of minors and the right of adults to make up their own minds and to seek out the help that they want to effect the changes desired

Questions raised by the vagueness of this legislation.

1. The Bible makes no distinction between a person's biological sex and their sexual identity. Is it now illegal to preach Genesis 1:27?
2. The scriptures recognize only heterosexual marriage, outside of which all people are commanded to exercise restraint and self control over sexual activity. Has the preaching of self-control (Gal 5:22-23) and the promotion of tools to aid it, become illegal in Canada?
3. Both the Old and New Testaments condemn homosexual behaviour, identifying it as sinful. Christian conversion – which brings with it the promise of salvation from sin requires repentance from sins and a reformation of life going forward. Is it now illegal in Canada to offer God's redemption to practising homosexuals and lesbians?
4. And is it illegal to support former homosexuals and lesbians who have become Christians, and to help them to remain faithful to their new spiritual life in Christ? It stands to reason that the temptation to relapse would be reduced if the same-sex attraction were diminished. If Christians aid their fellow Christians to seek such treatment or provide it to reduce temptation in an effort to overcome sin, and to remain faithful to their saviour, is this now a criminal act? And if yes, what protections are afforded by the 'freedom of religion' provisions of the Canadian Constitution?

Observations:

By censuring and criminalizing **only** those who attempt to 'convert' homosexual and non-cisgender persons, the law implicitly favours conversion moving in the opposite direction. This has long been evident. The public schools are mandated to portray and thus promote gay values and lifestyles as valid moral alternatives. Gender identity is taught as a matter separate from one's actual gender. And marriage has been redefined in Canada to include unions between persons of the same sex.

The 'field is tilted' and 'the deck is stacked'. All pretension of neutrality is gone and Parliament has declared war upon the church of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

An unfamiliar term:

The term '**cisgender**' stems from an effort to distinguish between biology and perception. No matter your sex, you can choose to 'be' (perceive yourself to be) whatever you wish. A non-cisgender person simply chooses to reject their biology and act upon the conviction (perception) that something else is true.

I am reminded of an argument that C.S. Lewis made regarding the identity of Jesus Christ who claimed to be God in the flesh.

Lewis wrote:

“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a *poached egg* — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse”. (Mere Christianity)

What Lewis meant was that the ‘facts in question’ must always be the measure of the ‘claims in perception’. The man claiming to be a poached egg is still a man. It does not help anyone for the rest of us to agree or to adopt his view of reality. It seems reasonable that only those who know a real poached egg when they see one, are in position to help.

Modern atheistic philosophers have always argued for the subjectivity of morality while affirming the objectivity of the material world. Our most recent crop of atheists have gone one step further, affirming the subjectivity of both and in Bill C-4 have enlisted the Canadian government to criminalize those who disagree.

As an act of desperation Bill C-4 is an intemperate use of power intended to prop up a failed worldview by criminalizing and imprisoning those who disagree. This use of power to destroy truth is straight out of Satan’s handbook. The Bible says that he has been a liar from the beginning and is in fact the “father of lies” (John 8:44).

Regarding our mandate to Evangelize

Writing to the churches in Rome, the apostle Paul made it clear that the gospel of Jesus Christ is God’s power (his one and only way) to save the world from sin. Stated negatively, unless sinners hear, believe and obey the gospel, they cannot be saved. There is no other remedy.

Paul goes on to explain that the gospel reveals two things. It reveals how righteous God is and how we can participate in His righteousness. And it details those against whom the wrath of God is directed. Here is what he wrote – and notice how it applies to this parliamentary bill and the society whose values it expresses (**Romans 1:18-32**)

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes*, *that is*, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, being understood by what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honour Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their reasonings, and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible mankind, of birds, four-footed animals, and crawling creatures.

Therefore God gave them up to vile impurity in the lusts of their hearts, so that their bodies would be dishonoured among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for falsehood, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged natural relations for that which is contrary to nature, and likewise the men, too, abandoned natural relations with women and burned in their desire toward one another, males with males committing shameful acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a depraved mind, to do those things that are not proper, *people* having been filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, *and* evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, *and* malice; *they are* gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unfeeling, *and* unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also approve of those who practice them.”

The apostle traced the sharp downward moral spiral of those who in every age, deny the being and person of God. And while the list of sins goes far beyond the subject matter of Bill C-4, the sins of homosexuality and lesbianism are prominent.

The preaching of salvation in Christ includes information about just what kind of conduct constitutes sin and falls under God’s eternal judgment. Given that salvation is offered upon condition of repentance, those who would accept God’s grace are required to embrace His goodness and become His agents of change. **Bill C-4 appears to forbid what God commands.** In order to remain faithful to God, we must respond as the apostles did when faced with a ‘gag order’ from the high court of the Jews. ‘We must obey God rather than men’ (Acts 5:29)

Not only is it our duty to share the gospel, it is our mandate from God to help those coming out of a life of sin – to persist in righteousness. We come alongside adulterers and fornicators to keep them faithful. We stand with addicts of all kinds to fight addiction. And we must help those who have renounced their gay way of life – to remain faithful to



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their Lord and master.

In the first century, some who had once practised homosexuality had become part of the early church. Paul wrote to the whole church for the purpose of strengthening them in their new way of life and encouraging them to remain faithful.

In I Cor 6:9-11 Paul wrote:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor *the* greedy, nor those habitually drunk, nor verbal abusers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

Persecution has always had the unintended consequence of strengthening the convictions of those persecuted. It forces those who hold them, to get serious or to get out. And while it has never been an effective means of achieving the goals of those who use it, Satan still does. He works through agents, to intimidate and silence. And since Satan has never had the truth on his side, he invariably resorts to the use of force.

The church of the first century prospered in the face of persecution for it worshipped a crucified saviour and served a resurrected Lord. They counted it a high privilege to be counted worthy to suffer (Acts 5:41) and took up their cross daily (Luke 9:23) having counted the cost (Luke 14:33). God blessed them and strengthened them to endure and will do so today.

What Should We Do?

- Don't panic – calmly obey God rather than men: Satan is condemned already as are all who are in league with him. Do not fear their intimidation (I Pet 3:14-16)
- Evangelize: Continue to speak the truth of God, in love. The salvation of the world depends upon it and public opinion will not change without it. Value the souls of others over the comfort of ourselves.
- Pray:
 - For courage to speak out and for strength to endure.
 - For repentance on the part of those who have authored and supported this bill.
 - And for the conversion of those who are lost..for without conversion to Christ, all those who are lost will remain so.
- Appeal to your member of parliament
 - Email, write, call and visit to discuss your beliefs and views
 - Vote with your conscience. Make this issue and others that are faith-related, central to the next ballot that you cast.
- Appeal to the courts

- God is able to work through all men and women, whether saved or unsaved. Support those who will challenge the constitutionality of this bill in court.

Conclusion:

It is not only that God has called us for such a time as this, but that such times remind us that. "... our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12)

May we then persist in "destroying arguments and all arrogance raised against the knowledge of God", and strive to take "every thought captive to the obedience of Christ..." (2 Cor 10:5)

¹https://www.parl.ca/Content/Bills/441/Government/C-4/C-4_4/C-4_4.PDF

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One Year

Written on: March 12, 2022

Article by: Thayer Salisbury

Goals

We arrived here at the end of March 2021 with the following goals in mind.

The textbook ministry has always been the focus. In the long run, this has the greatest potential for good. It will not produce the immediate results that a focus on evangelism might produce, but long-term it is critically important.

- We also wanted to help the churches in Eswatini with leadership issues. The church has been here since the mid-1960s, but only two congregations have appointed elders or deacons. One of those two have struggled recently because of the departure and resignation of most of the elders.
- We need to stay involved in a local church, and the one we chose is the Timbutini congregation. They handled our immigration paperwork for us, so it made sense.
- We hoped to build a house on land that one member at Timbutini had offered to us. He then hoped to pay us back for the house at some point in the future.
- We hoped to learn SiSwati this time. When we lived here 2000-2003, we were teaching at a school that had very few native Swazi students. There was little reason and little opportunity to learn the language at that time. This time, we thought that we would be living in Timbutini, surrounded by the language, and that we would learn it.

Reality

Eleven months in, the reality is, as always, a bit different than the plan. The textbook work has advanced faster than expected. We have

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brought out a completely revised and expanded textbook covering Genesis and Exodus. We have made a surprising amount of progress on a second volume which will cover Leviticus through Deuteronomy. Through the “Priming the Pump” effort, two books (*God-Centred Bible Study* and *God’s Mission Begins, vol 1*) have been shipped to four schools in Nigeria and two schools in Zambia.

Working with local congregations on leadership has proven more difficult than expected. COVID related restrictions on travel and assembly are still in place here. And there were also times of political unrest that made it unsafe to travel. We are, however, beginning to make progress on this. I have been holding a weekday evening class for those of the Fairview church who are able to attend. This coming Sunday I will begin a once per month Sunday morning sermon series for the whole congregation. In June I am scheduled to speak at Pigg’s Peak on the need for biblical leadership.

The difficulties working with other congregations have allowed us more time to work with the Timbutini church. I travel to Timbutini either on Friday or Saturday (and sometimes both days). Elijah Malaza and I do house to house visitation. I have also



been holding a Bible study at the Makwakwa homestead. We were able to baptize three of those attending this study on Sunday. I have done most of the preaching at Timbutini since we arrived. Attendance has rebounded considerable. Twenty-five was a good attendance a year ago. Now we have close to fifty each Sunday.

The idea of building a house in Timbutini has not gone well. The brother who owned the land admitted that, if we built a full-sized house, he would not be able to repay us within the foreseeable future. I suggested that I could loan him enough money so that he could build a small weekend cottage on the property. He thought that this would work, and that he would be able to repay us within a reasonable time.

If it had worked, it would have been a real blessing to the work in Timbutini, since different ones of us who are interested in the work could have gone out from time to time to spend a couple of days there. But, with none of us living nearby to supervise, the construction did not go well. The funds we loaned were all used up without producing a usable cottage. [Note: this was our own money, coming from the sale of our home in the States. No donated funds were risked in this effort.]

Our efforts to learn SiSwati have not gone well. We have had to rent a house. The one we could afford is ideal for many aspects of our work. But the location does not bring

us into much contact with SiSwati speakers; and we have been unable to find a teacher to help us. I am not sure that I know any more SiSwati than I did a year ago.

All in all it has been an excellent first eleven months. The textbook work is proceeding better than expected. The leadership training effort is beginning to pick up momentum. The work with the Timbutini church is leading to growth. We have suffered a financial setback. We are not doing well on language learning. But maybe these things will improve as well.

Keep us in your prayers.

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I Have Made You a Watchman

Written on: February 28, 2022

Article by: Nathan Brown

The first three chapters of Ezekiel record God's interactions with Ezekiel at the outset of his prophetic ministry. God does not pull any punches when he informs Ezekiel of the road ahead. Instead, He tells Ezekiel exactly how difficult his ministry is going to be: "I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are also impudent and stubborn" (Ezekiel 2:3–4, ESV).

God's people did not want to hear what He had to say about their situation because they had already made up their minds. Their failure to listen did not absolve Ezekiel of his responsibility to speak. God continues:

"I send you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them" (2:4–5).

God tells Ezekiel that he is to speak up, regardless of whether people listen. God knows that Ezekiel's audience is going to ignore the opportunity He is giving them to repent, but He sends Ezekiel anyway so that there is no doubt about his audience's culpability. They are not helpless pawns, powerless to do anything about the fate a capricious God has waiting for them; rather, they are choosing to reject the grace offered by a loving God who takes no pleasure in what His righteousness requires Him to do when His people act as the Israelites have (cf. 18:25–32).

Having received this commission, Ezekiel has two choices: (1) obey God by speaking up, or (2) disobey God by staying quiet. There is no third option. The commands God issues to Ezekiel in 2:6–7

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illustrate the cost of obeying God. If God bothers to tell Ezekiel not to fear the people and their threats, even when “briers and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions,” i.e., when the threats proceed to physical violence, and not to be “dismayed at their looks” (2:6), it seems likely that threats, intimidation, and ridicule awaited Ezekiel. Indeed, these things transpire in the rest of the book. God insists that His people have forewarning of the fate that awaits them, and He insists that His prophet have forewarning of what proclaiming that fate will cost him. God has already classified Israel as rebels who will not listen, but what about the prophet?

Next, God calls for an action that symbolizes Ezekiel accepting his mission. He says: “But you, son of man, hear what I say to you. Be not rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you” (3:8). This command places Ezekiel in parallel with the people as a whole: they do not listen and are rebellious; he is to listen and not be rebellious. Ezekiel does not record what he was expecting God to feed him, but one might suspect that he was not expecting to eat a book. Nevertheless, what God puts in front of him is “a scroll of a book” (2:9). When opened, the scroll has writing on both sides that Ezekiel describes as “words of lamentation and mourning and woe” (2:10).

God repeats his command to eat (3:1), and Ezekiel obeys (3:2–3). The words of “lamentation and mourning and woe” (2:10) taste “as sweet as honey” (3:3), symbolizing that Ezekiel understands the necessity of the coming judgment and God’s righteousness in decreeing it. God then repeats Ezekiel’s mission, adding an explicit promise of assistance (3:4–11). By eating the book, Ezekiel has symbolically accepted

his mission and, thus, demonstrated his willing obedience; for this reason, God informs Ezekiel that He has already equipped Ezekiel for this task by hardening his face and forehead to match those of his audience (3:8). After reiterating Ezekiel’s mission, God once again shows him His glory, just like he saw it in chapter 1, and this experience overwhelmed him for a week (3:12–15).

After that week, however, God spoke with Ezekiel again,



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using a very poignant image to explain Ezekiel's role as a prophet: "I have made you a watchman" (3:17a). Being a watchman is another way to describe Ezekiel's responsibility to speak whatever God gave him to speak (3:17b). A watchman's job was to sound the warning when attackers appeared outside a city's wall; Ezekiel's job is to announce the judgment that is coming on God's people.

God further spells out what being a watchman looks like with a series of hypothetical cases (3:18–21). This series of four hypothetical situations demonstrates that the watchman is responsible for raising the alarm but not for whether anyone heeds it. Regardless of Ezekiel's action or inaction, those on whom God's judgment is coming will suffer that judgment: each case, except one, contains the statement that the category of person discussed "shall die for his iniquity/sin" (3:18, 19, 20). The sole exception, where Ezekiel's preaching affects the outcome, is when he warns a righteous person who heeds his warning (3:21). Although Ezekiel's preaching alters his audience's fate in only one of four hypothetical situations, his decision either to preach that message faithfully or to disobey by remaining silent affects his fate in each situation: in each case where he hypothetically remains silent, God says He will hold Ezekiel accountable for that person's blood (3:18, 20); in each case where he hypothetically speaks up, God says that he "will have delivered" his "soul" (3:19). Ezekiel's eternal destiny hinges on whether he speaks up or remains silent—not on the results.

That is all well and good for Ezekiel, living in Babylonia during the sixth century B.C., but where does it leave Christians in Canada during the twenty-first century A.D.? The most obvious application to draw would be to our responsibility to fulfill the Great Commission, even though the culture around us may seem, at best, indifferent and, at worst, hostile to the Gospel. Without a doubt, there is something to this: the Bible does teach that our eternal destinies hinge on our willingness to step out in faith and stand up for God even when it is not popular (e.g., Matthew 10:32).

Nevertheless, a more specific application seems in order here, given that God sent Ezekiel not "to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel" (3:5). This suggests that, just as Ezekiel's ministry was focused on God's people of his day, the proper application of the principles in it involves relationships between Christians at least as much as relationships with those outside the church. Granted, speaking God's truth to our brothers and sisters who have gone astray is not easy, and it must be done with the correct attitude (Galatians 6:1–2; John 13:34–35) and procedure (Matthew 18:15–20). The erring members of God's people today may not want to hear God's message any more than those in Ezekiel's day did, but that does not absolve Christians of the duty to speak (cf. 2 Tim 4:3–5). God has placed each Christian as a watchman to help others get to heaven. Dare we fail Him—and each other—by failing to discharge this duty?

Waterloo ON

“Your First Love” Remember... Repent... Do...

Written on: February 28, 2022

Article by: Paul Birston

Revelation 2:1–7

Letters can be very personal and meaningful. Letters from people we know remind us of important events, thoughts and feelings we share.

So it is encouraging that when God had eternally important things to tell His people in the first century, and for all ages, He chose to put many of them in letters. The large majority of New Testament books are letters. Some of these, like Acts and Revelation, have letters within them.

In Revelation 2 and 3 we have seven personal letters from Jesus Christ by His beloved Apostle John in the Spirit to His seven angels of seven assemblies of His people in the Roman province of Asia. Each one is custom made for its readers.

Though Jesus is the main subject of the New Testament, He didn't physically write in it, except on the ground in John 8:1–11. He did, however, dictate these seven special letters. In Revelation 1:3 God promises, **“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.”**

Structure & Message

Jesus' seven letters generally have an eight point structure though not all points are present or necessary in every letter:

- 1) a salutation, an opening greeting, with instructions and a vision of Jesus related to John's, writing, vision and meeting with Him in chapter 1, plus a reference to David
- 2) an encouraging commendation
- 3) a convicting rebuke
- 4) correcting commands
- 5) consequences of not obeying His commands
- 6) a further positive commendation
- 7) Jesus' command to hear what the Spirit says to all His assemblies
- 8) a beautiful promise of reward for overcomers.

You will notice the important messages contained in each of these elements in Jesus' first letter to the assembly of His people in Ephesus as you read Revelation 2:1–7,

“To the angel of the assembly in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: 2 ‘I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; 3 and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. 5 Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place— unless you repent. 6 Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.”

Greeting

In His opening salutation, Jesus refers directly to John’s vision of Him and two of His metaphors, the stars and the lamp-stands, His angels and His assemblies. (You may recall our closer look at these in December 2020, <https://gospelherald.org/2103-2/>).

Jesus holds each angel (messenger) star in His right hand, a position of power and blessing. Jesus’ is among His assemblies, His golden lampstands. He adds for the Ephesians that He is the One who *walks* among them all. This is an inspiring and sobering thought. Jesus is always among us as our Lord and Head though unseen. He knows what’s going on within us and in the world pressing in around us. We, as golden lampstands, are to hold up the light of Jesus to shine in the world and light up the spheres of our service with Him as the menorah lit up the tabernacle and temple spaces where God’s priests served. John’s vision magnified Jesus, our High Priest. We are His royal priesthood.



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Commendation I

In verses 2 and 3 we see nine of Jesus' ten commendations of the Ephesians in three groups of three: **"I know**

I. 1) **your deeds and 2) your toil and 3) perseverance, and**

II. 4) **that you cannot tolerate evil men, and 5) you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and 6) you found them to be false; and**

III. 7) **you have perseverance and 8) have endured for My name's sake, and 9) have not grown weary."**

We should admire, and aspire to, all of these!

Conviction

In verse 4 we have Jesus' conviction and rebuke of this hard working congregation. With all their diligent labour and guts to stand up for the truth against evil men and liars, it's hard to imagine how any human could find fault. Wouldn't 9 out of 10 be good enough? But Jesus knows everyone's hearts and He aims for perfection. He says, **"But I have this against you, that you have left your first love."**

Jesus' word for left is *aphiemi*, which in this context means to move away, cause a separation, leave, depart, give up, abandon, let go like a ship's ropes from its mooring. His word for first, *protos*, *proton*, indicates what is first in a series in time and space, in a sequence or set of things, in essence, what is first above all, the earliest deep love of God they experienced by His grace.

How can we know what exactly is "your first love" for the Ephesians in their first century world? We are fortunate to have great sources in Acts 18, 19 and 20, Paul's letter to the Ephesians and his first letter to Timothy. Together these tell us about their love over the approximately ten year period from about AD 53 to 63. They saw Paul's passion for God and for them and how hard he worked to show love in practical terms. He commends them for **"your love for all the holy ones"** (Ephesians 1:15b).

Love, *agape*, for them includes all of 1) the love of God, 2) the love of neighbour and 3) the love of one another (John 13:34). It is love without limits, warm heartfelt regard and keen interest in others, seeking their good above one's own, the very core of who God is as John earlier wrote in His first letter, "God is love" (1 John 4:8b, 16b). It is the love that is first among God's great commandments and the fruit of His Spirit.

Over the forty years from the beginning of Paul's time with them to receiving Jesus' Revelation letter, the Ephesians had continued strong in the battle of truth. They were speaking and standing for the truth but their love had taken a beating. They needed renewal of their love. In the fourth part of His letter, Jesus gives them three correcting commands, important steps on the way back to their first love: 1) remember, 2) repent, 3) do...

Commands: Remember, Repent, Do

“Therefore *remember* from where you have fallen” (2:5). Remembering involves recalling what we know. The Ephesians had fallen from a height of love they knew. They needed to recall it and get back up there to the riches of God’s love and their inheritance in His heavenly places. They needed to keep God and these eternal blessings foremost in their minds while they continued in the war for truth.

“*Repent* and *do* the deeds you did at first!” (2:5). Jesus opened His ministry as John the Baptist did with the words, **“Repent for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand”** (Matthew 3:2; 4:17). Jesus’ word for repent is another function of the mind closely linked with remembering. *Metanoya* is a compound of “with” and “mind,” to change with thinking. Paul taught the Ephesians **“repentance toward God.”** Repentance is a turning to God directed by the mind and the will. Repentance is a key step in first knowing God and *establishing* and then *maintaining* a relationship with Him as we constantly correct our focus to be fixed on Him.

There is a beautiful parallel to Jesus’ commandments to remember, repent and do in the faith, grace and works of which Paul wrote to the Ephesians about in Ephesians 2:10–11. **“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”** God’s grace ignites our first experiences of His love. This leads us to repentant faith because of His overwhelming goodness to us demonstrated in Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection for our forgiveness and justification. In response to all He has done for us we show our love in return by doing the works He has prepared for us to walk in.

Consequences

Jesus provided further motivation by giving the Ephesians clear consequences and reemphasising repentance, **“or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent”**(2:5). Since their lampstand is their congregation that is to hold forth Jesus the Light of the World, the consequences of not remembering, repenting and doing are a total loss of their eternal status in God’s grace in Christ.

Commendation II

Jesus returns to another positive commendation in verse 6, **“Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”** Little is known of this group which some connect with Nicolas the deacon (Acts 6:5) but we do learn in Jesus’ third letter to Pergamum there is a connection to Balaam, idolatry and immorality (2:14–15). The Ephesians hated these like Jesus hated them.

Command to Hear

Jesus encourages them to hear everything He has said, in verse 7, **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the assemblies.”**

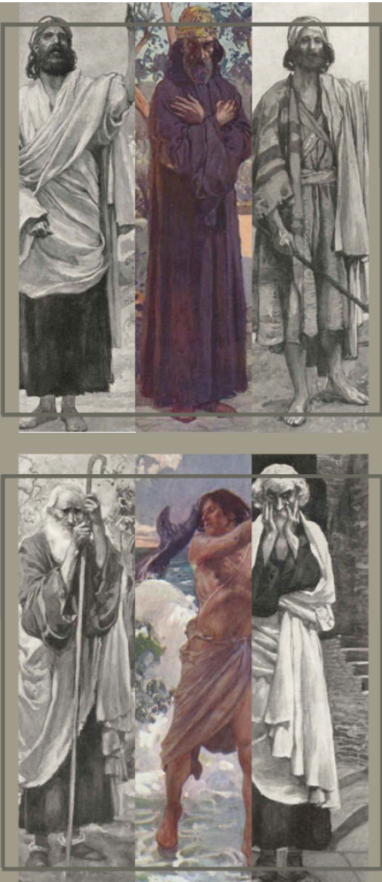
Jesus' Promise of Reward

Finally, Jesus gives this beautiful promise, **“To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the Tree of Life which is in the Paradise of God”**(2:7). The ones overcoming are the victorious ones, from the word family of victory, *nike*. Victory is the opposite of giving up and abandoning their first love.

Profoundly, this is the first mention of The Tree of Life since thousands of years earlier when God closed access to it when He removed Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. All His overcomers have free access to it in the new heaven, the new earth and the new Jerusalem in Revelation 22.

The Ephesians reading, hearing and doing Jesus' commands would find that opening and reading His letter is eternally rewarding. When we in our day open and read Jesus' letter to the Ephesians we see its encouraging words, strong honest critique and instructions on how to correct our course to return to our first love: remember... repent... do...

You can read more, and see pictures, on the important context of Jesus' people in Ephesus here: <https://app.box.com/s/k7fmo453emievy3kpvtlo7pjdrirzzto>



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When God Uses Mud

Written on: February 28, 2022

Article by: Tim Johnson

As we slide into spring, we expect one of the muddiest times of the year, especially here in Canada. Mud is a part of life for kids, dogs, and even adults. If we could go back in time even a hundred years, we would be shocked by all the mud. People worked in it, sunk in it and were often caked by it. Before regular bathing became common, people scraped it off themselves or beat it free with broom-like devices. Thankfully we live in a cleaner environment, but it seems that God often uses the humble things of life, including mud, to teach us and to change us.

Consider three Biblical examples of how mud – changed people.

THERE WAS ONE WHO DESPISED IT.

In 2 Kings 5 we find the well-known story of the great Aramean military leader, Naaman. He was a valiant warrior who had won important victories for the king of Syria. His boss appreciated and respected him, but as an idolater, he didn't know that the God of Israel was the one who had made Naaman successful. Despite all of that, Naaman suffered from leprosy. His skin would have been scarred and he would have lived in constant pain.

At the suggestion of a young Hebrew slave-girl, Naaman sought help from God's prophet Elisha. Respecting ancient political protocol, he came first to Samaria and to the Israelite king Jehoram. He asked Jehoram to send for Elisha, so that the prophet might heal him. Because Jehoram was an unbeliever, he was sure that Naaman was looking for an excuse to go to war by asking for something that could not be done. But Elisha sent word that it could be done and directed Jehoram to send Naaman to him. It was

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only natural then, that when Naaman arrived he expected a miracle. He also expected same respect and deference from Elisha that had been shown him by the king of Israel

Naaman was unpleasantly surprised when Elisha did not even come out to meet him in person! Elisha sent a lowly messenger with blunt instructions to: “Go and wash in the Jordan river seven times and you shall be clean!” Naaman became furious and went off in a huff. He didn’t think much of the muddy Jordan river. At least the rivers back home were clean and clear. He found it all very humiliating.

Wise assistants convinced Naaman to follow Elisha’s instructions. After all, the prophet had actually said – YES! So it was that when he dipped for the seventh time in those murky waters, his skin became *like the flesh of a little child*. He was a changed man both in body and spirit. It took humility and obedience for Naaman to be healed, and in the process he became a believer.

God still requires the same. No one can be saved on their own terms. And no one can serve God without submitting to His will. Jesus humbled himself before his heavenly Father and came to serve his own servants. As His servants, we ought not expect glory and attention for doing what our master has already done. Like Naaman, we need to ‘get over ourselves’, in order to serve our Lord with humility.

Mud sometimes teaches us humility and reminds us that there has never been anyone more humble than our Lord and Master.

THE ONE WHO WELCOMED IT.

The unknown blind man of John 9 had a hard life, having been unable to see since birth. Jesus and the disciples encountered him not far from the temple, for he was a beggar used to sitting in the dirt by the side of the road. We meet others like him in the New Testament, such as Bartimaeus in Luke 18.

The disciples first instinct was to debate what it was that had caused his blindness and his low position in life. Rather than helping, they asked: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he should be born blind?” If I might condense Jesus’s answer, He said, ***“It’s nobody’s fault, but God can do something good with it, and this is our opportunity to do it now.”*** Rather than debate the reasons for the man’s handicap, Jesus simply wanted to help him. Isn’t it always easier to debate someone’s need than to take up the opportunity to help?

Jesus made mud out of dirt and spit, which is a bit revolting because he smeared it on the man’s eyes. Then he sent him to the pool of Siloam to wash it off. Suddenly, and for the first time in his life, that man could see! What a wonderful shock, to see other people and the sights all around. Why we might ask, did Jesus use mud? Perhaps because *this* man was used to mud; he could relate to it. He needed to *feel* Jesus healing him instead of simply hearing him speak the words. Jesus used an ordinary substance that in itself had no healing power, to produce a miracle. The man welcomed it.

To Naaman, muddy water was humiliating. To this blind man, mud gave him his sight. God can take the muddy, difficult things of life and turn them into something helpful, something to learn from, and something that can change us.

THE ONE WHO GREW FROM IT.

The fourth-smallest book of the New Testament, Philemon, reveals the difficult circumstances of Onesimus the slave, and the heart of his master. Verse 11 indicates that this servant was not especially useful; perhaps lazy or incompetent. It may have been that Philemon had given him the worst jobs in his household. You might say, that Onesimus was used to the mud and grime of lowly service.

At some point he ran away from his master, ending up in Rome, about 1200 miles from where he set out. That's like walking from Toronto to Winnipeg. He would have begged for food along the way, worked at miserable jobs, and maybe even stole things just to survive. The security of Philemon's home must have seemed much better after he struggled along. Finally reaching Rome, he somehow encountered Paul in confinement and soon obeyed the gospel. The apostle cared for him and matured him in Christ. He became a valuable servant of the Lord. In fact, his name actually means "*useful*." The writer makes this play on words in verse 11.

Paul eventually had to decide what to do about Onesimus, for technically he was owned by Philemon on another continent. Paul had no legal right to keep him in Rome. So the decision was made to send Onesimus back to Colossae. In his accompanying letter he appealed to Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother, for he had become a strong Christian. He was not just a menial slave like he was before (see v16).

A tough life of muddy chores and the hardships of being a fugitive motivated this man to seek something better, and he found it in Christ and His people. They gave him a new life based on a new saviour and a new gospel.

There's an ancient historical record that speaks of a Christian named Onesimus in the late first century who became an elder in the church in Ephesus. Was this him? We don't know for sure. What we do know is that the once useless slave became a very useful Christian. The mud and dust of slave service brought this man to seek a better life.

I hope you realize that I am using the word *mud*, to refer to life's messy, tough, and humbling difficulties.

Naaman and the muddy Jordan teaches us that we have to dispense with human pride before we can be blessed by God and saved from our sins. And having done so, to persist in humility when dealing with life's troubles. The blind man of Jerusalem teaches us that it doesn't matter how lowly and difficult our life is, God can save us, and make each one into a better person, with better things to live for. God also had better things in mind for Onesimus. He fled human slavery to become a slave of God and in so doing became truly useful. God did not save him from his duties under the law, but send him back to his earthly master – a changed man. God promises to do the same for us.

I'm reminded of Paul's words in 2 Cor.12:10, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."

What kind of muddy troubles have you been through as a person? Look to God in faith, for He can do wonders.

What Colour is a Soul?

Written on: February 28, 2022

Article by: Brian Thompson

*“And **He made from one (one man, one blood), every nation of mankind** to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him (feel their way towards Him) and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, even as some of your poets have said, ‘For we also are His offspring.’” (Acts 17:26-28)*

Having studied in the United States for three years to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree and having had an ongoing relationship with supporting congregations in five different states for about twenty years, I have observed that some of the racial unrest that existed in the past remains today.

One congregation divided over a marriage between Christians of two different races. Even the elders were divided with one leaving the congregation in disagreement with the majority who approved. When I first heard of this I just couldn't believe it. I was angry and disappointed. Angry that Jesus was so poorly represented by those who claimed to belong to him. And disappointed that such attitudes persisted, indicating that Satan was clawing back something that Jesus had overcome.

The first century version – took place between Jews and Gentiles. So Paul assured his brothers and sisters, that Christ had broken down the wall that divided them and had made them into one person – uniting each one of them spiritually with Himself. (Eph 2:14-15) and thus with each other. Their souls had become ‘one’ in Christ without regard to race, gender or social distinction.

As Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia: For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is



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neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:27-28)

All of us know that skin colour and culture sometimes go hand in hand. Even people of the same 'colour' may divide over history, language and tribal loyalty. But Jesus came to earth, to break down barriers. It is not acceptable to God for those who are willing to allow Jesus to remove the dividing wall of sin between us and God, to then refuse to tear down the barriers that remain between themselves and others. When cultural differences divide God's people, the root of the problem is internal and not external.

Satan thrives on hate. He divides in order to conquer. He magnifies differences, casting every word and deed in the worst possible light. Racial and social unrest ought not exist among those whose souls have come to rest in Jesus. Of 'one' the Lord has made the race...the human race. How it must grieve Him then to see people of every nation, tongue and race, stoking the fires of hate!

When you read the Bible, what colour do you imagine that Adam was? What about Abraham, from Ur of the Chaldees, or David his descendant? Perhaps without a second thought, we each picture them looking back at us from the mirror?

My point is, that the heroes of the Bible were just that, without any regard for the colour of their skin or the culture of the day. They were heroes by virtue of their faith and examples by the courage that it took to be obedient.

When we die, our skin will decay and disappear, but not so – our souls. God pays no attention to what we look like on the outside – but to the person whom we are on the inside. (1 Sam 16:7). And if our souls have a colour in the day that our Lord returns, it must be one that has been washed in the blood of Jesus and clothed in His righteousness.

It remains then, for us still, to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all nations (colours, races)..." (Matt.28:18-20).

Acts 2 and the Message of Joel

Written on: February 28, 2022

Article by: Leslie Williams

The Bible is a message of hope. This hope is understood as God's choice to be involved with his creation, and to be in relationship with those whom he has created. God did not fashion robotic creatures who would always conform to His will but be incapable of love. He chose to create creatures "in his image", who like God could respond in love. Love demands a choice, and so even in the garden, Adam and Eve had the choice to love him or reject him.

Many struggle to understand in the words of the prophets as message of hope. The prophet is seen as one coming to declare God's wrath and inevitable punishment on his wayward people. The nature of prophesy was to give people a choice to repent, and give God an opportunity to respond in grace to people's repentance.

Consider God's message to the prophet Jeremiah as recorded in Jeremiah 18. Jeremiah was called to witness the potter working on a pot. When the pot was marred, the potter started over, reshaping the clay into another vessel. God's message to Jeremiah was "Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does? If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned." The nature of prophesy was not just to declare destruction, it was to give a wayward sinful people an opportunity to repent, and to change God's action from cursing to blessing. The goal was to re-establish God's Lordship and rule among his people, to restore a covenant relationship.

The message of the prophet Joel is a wonderful example of the nature of prophesy. Joel shows up to forecast a locust plague of terrible proportions. What could be understood as a natural disaster turns out to be a supernatural event—the locust will be God's army. They are unstoppable and relentless, devouring all vegetation until nothing is left but the expectation of famine and starvation. The day of the Lord has brought judgment on the house of Israel, who can endure it?


But that is not the end of the message. "Even now," declares the Lord "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning." Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing. (Joel 2:12-14)

God desires a relationship with his people, but He is not blind to the elements of that relationship. He is holy, he cannot ignore sin and rebellion. He will never be content with a relationship lacking all that is good; trust, faithfulness, love, and mercy. Therefore, the prophet comes announcing judgment, that the abandonment of one's faith in relationship means the loss of the blessings of relationship. God is just to condemn and is just to permanently sever the relationship broken by man's

unfaithfulness. But that is not the final act of God in dealing with His people. In Joel's day, he acts out of grace to send the prophet, to warn His beloved, and to open a way out of destruction to salvation. He gives them the opportunity to repent of their actions. Again, God gives His people a choice. Choose judgment: remain hard-hearted or repent. God's character: His love, His grace, His compassion, allow man a final opportunity to choose the outcome of His judgment. If mankind continues in sin, he has chosen condemnation. If man repents, God can also repent of sending calamity on His people. God allows our choices to affect His action.

God speaks through Joel of a future Day of the Lord, a day when all nations will be called to the valley of Judgment. Peter identifies the fulfillment of this prophesy with the events of Acts 2. On this day, God once again acts out of love and mercy. He sends his Son and gives people a choice. All men are guilty of sin, and all have fallen short of God's glory. All stand condemned but God, slow to anger and abounding in love, acts to redeem a broken relationship. He is a God of love, and instead of carrying through with just condemnation, he gives mankind a choice. It is an opportunity for us to repent so that He then also can turn and relent. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Regina SK




The Mist on the Mountain

Virginia Hipwell


The newspaper dismissed them with three brief words – "The children escaped." But the newspaper was wrong. They did not escape. Whether grown and out on their own or still young and at home, they all suffered. Not even the four year old grandchild was able to escape the aftermath which drifted across four generations.

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Virginia Morgan Hipwell was born and raised in Scioto County, Ohio. After high school, when a Canadian captured her heart, she moved to southern Ontario. She and husband Don share the family farm with their daughter and her family. Two of their three sons live in Ohio while the middle one resides in Saskatchewan. They have grandchildren in all three locations and great-grandchildren in Ohio. For several years, Virginia served as an associate editor for *Gospel Herald* writing a monthly column titled "Through a Woman's Eyes". She has also written numerous poems, a few short stories and lyrics for some Sunday school songs.

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