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Godliness. Reverence. Obedience. Worship.

GR W magazine

a quarterly e-magazine designed to promote
growth in faith and service to God

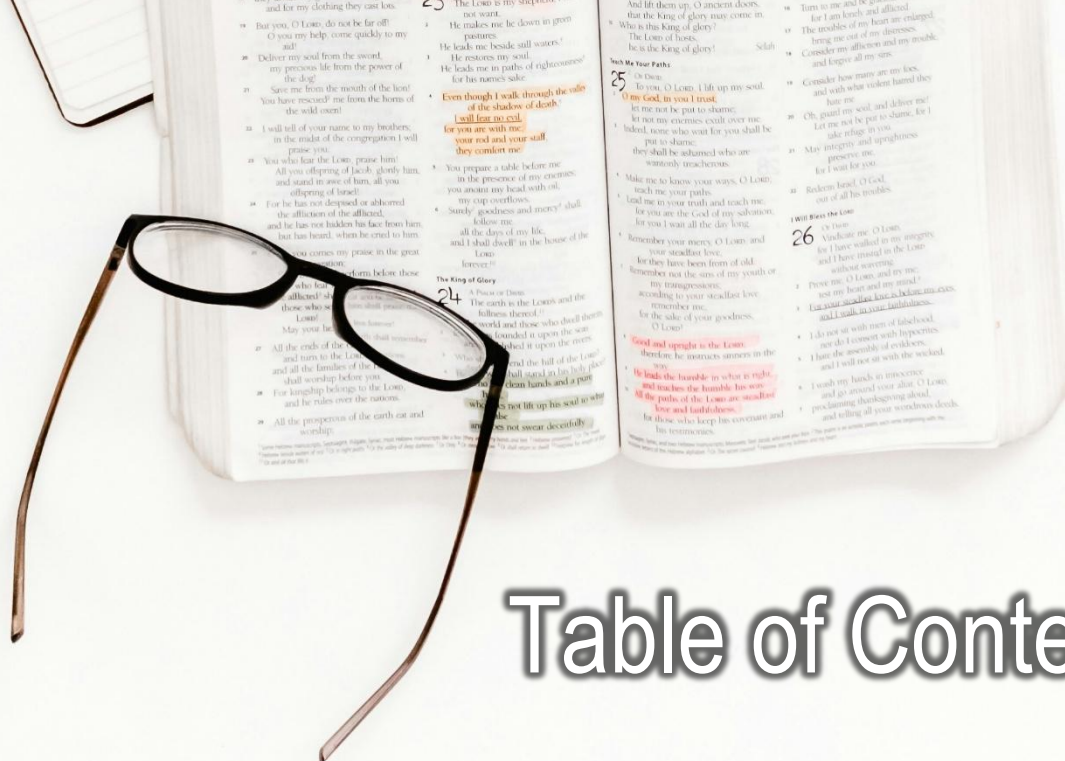


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From the Editors...

In the planning stages of GROW magazine, we sought to create an e-publication which would help any and all who want to GROW in faith. This is not a “preacher’s periodical,” but a “disciples digest.” Our aim is to provide a mixture of Bible topics and we’ve enlisted the help of skilled writers. Some are evangelists, some are not, but all of them are full-time Christians. We are thankful for the time and effort our writers have devoted to the material in this quarter’s issue. It begins with a scholarly exposition of Romans 7 and ends with an essential current issue – our use of social media. Between these bookends, we find articles urging us to be active

servants of God, concerned for our brethren, glorifying God, putting His word into practice and sharing it with others.

We appreciate your interest in this publication, and if you deem it to be helpful, we encourage you to share it with others. Forward the notification email, post articles or the site address to social media, print individuals articles or this document which includes all six of this quarter’s articles.

Now, come GROW with us!

Cordially,
Sean P. Cavender, chief editor
William Stewart, editor & designer



The Regenerated Man or the Un-regenerated Man?

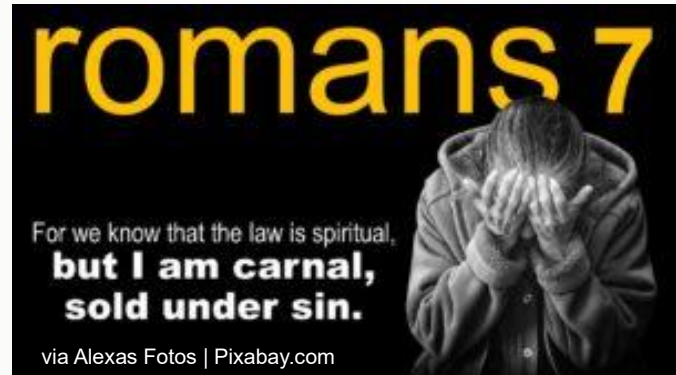
JEFF ASHER | NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

This chapter has proven no small source of complication and consternation to many dedicated Bible students. Part of the difficulty lies in the English versions which are not completely unbiased in their own assumptions about the passage. Add to this the use of difficult words and repetitive phrases (some of which cannot be avoided) and even the diligent reader gets bogged down. Also, the theological systems and creeds have influenced and prejudiced the minds of many who would study the passage. The pervasiveness of such doctrines as “original sin,” “total depravity,” “limited atonement,” and “human inability” cloud the perception and impede understanding. We are just unaware sometimes of the prejudice we bring to a text. We must strive to be open-minded, seeking an honest encounter with the words on the page.

The title suggests at least one question, the answer to which, is the key to understanding the text. About whom is the Apostle Paul speaking in these verses? It is obvious that at verse 9 Paul takes up the personal, singular pronoun “I.” But, is he speaking of himself presently (that is, at the time of writing the epistle), or is he speaking of himself at some time in the past? Furthermore, when Paul does speak of himself in this chapter, does he consider himself as a regenerated (“born again”) man; or does he have himself in view as an un-regenerated man, in other words as an unbelieving sinner? Is it possible that there is even more to it than that, should we be looking at Paul in a more unique and complex reality that is important to the message of the book as a whole?

Chapter Seven in the Context of the Entire Epistle

It is important to keep before the mind’s eye the structure of this book and the development of its themes. There are two major ideas



developed in the *Epistle to Rome*. These are expressed in a single sentence in Romans 1:16, “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.*” It is again stated in a more complete and comprehensive fashion in Romans 3:20-26.

“Therefore, by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness,

*that He might be just and the justifier,
of the one who has faith in Jesus.”*

The primary theme of the book is: “Justification is by grace through faith in Christ Jesus apart from the works of the Law of Moses.” As already observed, this is stated in Chapter 1 and reiterated throughout the book (Romans 3:22, 24, 26; 4:2-3, 5-6, 9, 11, 13; 5:1, 9; 6:16; 9:30-32; 10:3-6). Paul clearly distinguishes between the Law and the Gospel, justification by works of the Law and the obedience of faith. Yet, there is a secondary theme, perhaps subordinate to this one in the first eight chapters of the book, but certainly coming to the fore in Chapters 9, 10 & 11.

This secondary theme is first expressed in Romans 1:16 within the phrase, *“to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.”* It is clearly defined in Romans 2:10-11, *“For there is no respect of persons with God.”* Paul is confident in his epistle that justification by grace through faith is to *“everyone”* and *“whoever”* believes on Christ. *“There is no distinction between Jew and Greek ... whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”* (Romans 2:10; 3:22, 29; 10:4, 12-13). Thus, this great secondary theme is no less important than the concept of justification by grace through faith itself. Justification is not limited to a certain arbitrary number, or social status, or gender, or race; it is *“to everyone that believes on Jesus ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*

Chapter seven must be considered in the light of this great spiritual reality. The Jew could not be justified through any virtue of his physical descent from Moses (Romans 4:1-3, 9; cf. Matthew 3:9; Luke 3:8). Children of God are born, *“not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God”* (John 1:13). The Jew needed to know why their inheritance was not of the Law, what the purpose of the Law was, and why acceptance by God was not predicated upon their covenant of circumcision and the Law of Moses (Romans 3:21; 4:13; 10:4-5; Galatians 3:19, 21; cf. Philippians 3:9).

Paul in Chapter seven answered these questions and explains fully why the Jew needed the Gospel.

Paul Addresses His Jewish Brethren

Paul is addressing Jews, in particular, Jewish Christians. Notice that he not only calls them *“brethren”* but also *“them that know the law”* (Romans 7:1). The idea in *“know”* is to understand, or to be sure about a thing. He makes it clear rhetorically that they are not ignorant or uninformed when he began by asking, *“know ye not”* or *“do you not know?”* It is evident that Paul is addressing those in his audience that are well versed in the Law of Moses. Such an appeal was to be expected knowing that Paul had previously anticipated the objections of the Jews in general to the Gospel (Romans 3:1-8), and that he had laid out a well-reasoned explanation of Genesis 15:6 showing that Abraham was justified by faith before and without circumcision (Romans 4). We cannot lose sight of these facts in studying Chapter Seven without missing the point toward which Paul is driving.

There are other context clues which we can consider that establish that Paul is speaking to Jews about being Jews under the Law, to convince and convict them of the superiority and singular efficacy of justification by grace through faith in Christ. For example, in verse six, Paul contrasts the *“oldness of the letter”* with *“the newness of the spirit.”* This is certainly a reference to the Law of Moses (Romans 2:29; cf. 2 Corinthians 3:6). The Gentiles were never held by the Law as were the Jews (Romans 7:4), though the Jews did seek to seduce them into that bondage (Galatians 3:1; 5:1-4); yet, the idea of *“oldness”* does not convey the Gentile relationship to the Law of Moses (cf. Ephesians 2:11-12).

Another example is found in verse 9 where Paul affirms, *“I was alive without the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.”* Clearly, Paul is referring to the Law of Moses (7:10). He cannot be describing himself according to the popular doctrines concerning

“original sin” in which state one would be, according to the doctrine, born spiritually dead. Neither can he be describing himself as a child of God under the Gospel, because he says of himself: “I am carnal sold *under sin*” (7:14). Those words cannot describe a believer justified by faith (cf. 1 John 2:1-5; Romans 8:31-39). Paul is describing himself as a sincere Jew under the Law of Moses convicted of sin knowing that there is no justification by the works of the Law. His earnest pleading is: “*How can I be saved when the Law condemns me at every turn?*” (7:24). Paul in these verses personifies the Jew looking for the consolation of Israel and the knowledge of the remission of sins (cf. Luke 1:77; 2:25-32, 38). By literary figure, Paul uses himself as the prototype of a sincere Jew wrestling with the realities of the condemnation which the Law brought and the continual reminders that there was no efficacy in the sacrifices and rituals of its institutions (Leviticus 16:21; Micah 6:6-7; Psalm 50:7-15; 51:14-17; Isaiah 1:11; cf. Hebrews 9:7-10; 10:1-4, 11). The hope of Israel lay elsewhere, in a new King, a new covenant and a new worship (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 16:60-63; 37:21-38). Paul was, as every earnest Jew, searching for the solution to the devastating reality of the guilt of sin (Romans 7:24).

The Law Has Died And Israel Is Freed To Marry Christ

“Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while he husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man. Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another,

even him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God. For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter”
(Romans 7:1-6).

Paul uses God’s law concerning marriage as the basis for an analogy by which he demonstrates to Jewish Christians their relationship to the Law since God has accomplished His purpose through Christ. He states the divine intent of the marriage law as being: One man and one woman until death should separate them both (Genesis 2:23-25; cf. Matthew 5:32; 19:6-9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7:1-12, 39; etc.). Therefore, the Jews are freed from their covenant of the Law by the death of Christ which in effect “*nailed the Law to the cross*” (Colossians 2:11-14; Ephesians 2:14-16).

Thus, free from their former spouse they could be “*married*” to Christ (Hosea 2:19-20; cf. 2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:27). The sect of the circumcision desired to remain under the Law while covenanted with Christ (Acts 15:5; Galatians 2:12; 6:15-16; Philippians 3:2-3). This would be spiritual adultery. It is one or the other, it cannot be both. Paul does not develop in this context all the logical consequences of seeking to be joined to both covenants. He will treat with this more extensively in *The Epistle to the Galatians*. His conclusion there is: “*You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace*” (Galatians 5:4; cf. Romans 6:14-17; 11:6). Paul’s objective is not only to establish the abolition of the law, but also to affirm the sanctity of their covenant with Christ which they made by their death to sin and union with Him (Romans 6:20-22). Because of their marriage to Christ, they are no longer held in dominion to sin, that is, they were pardoned and being new creatures could live lives of righteousness service to God (Romans 5:11-14).

Under the Law they were *“in the flesh,”* this refers to their condition without the Gospel, specifically, their deadness in sin when their members were the instruments of unrighteousness (cf. Romans 6:6, 12-14, 18; 5:21). *“In the flesh”* was *“when the commandments came”* (7:9). It was when they were *“carnal, sold under sin”* (7:14). At that time, sin *“dwells within”* (7:17, 21). They were *“wretched”* (7:24). They did *“serve the law of sin”* (7:25). *“Flesh”* is not to be construed as an inherently sinful nature, i.e., an inborn drive or proclivity for sin. Romans 7:9 establishes that men are not born dead in sin because of a sin nature. The *“passions of sins”* or *“motions of sin”* neither indicates that human desires are inherently sinful, or that it is the fault of the commandment that men desire sinful things. Rather, Paul simply affirms that the Law identifies sin to the mind. with this new cognizance of sin, the Jew realized that *“our members,”* the body used in service to sin (Romans 6:12), were bearing fruit until spiritual death, condemnation (6:21). The Jews under the Law was relying upon himself to be righteous, once he sinned there was nothing in his own power, *“in the flesh,”* that he could do to effect righteousness. He might live blamelessly (cf. Philippians 3:6; Luke 1:6), but that would not atone for those sins which were committed under the Law (Romans 7:10; cf. Leviticus 18:5; Ezekiel 20:11). Living righteously became a futile exercise once *“sin revived.”*

Verse six introduces the beauty of grace extended to Jewish believers through the Gospel: *“We have been delivered from the law.”* This is true in two senses. First, they were delivered from it as a system of justification, righteousness by faith having come in. Second, they were delivered from it as the reason for their condemnation, the propitiation of Christ having appeased God’s wrath against them. Paul says: *“Having died to what we were held by,”* that is, the Law; being “dead” and married to Christ, they were no longer under its condemnation. In Paul’s analogy the Law died (7:1-4). He is not turning the figure around but simply expressing the fact that we are in a dead relationship as far as the Law is concerned. This makes more sense than trying to read Romans 6:2 and 7 back into

the text. It is evident that these believers are alive and married to the risen Christ so that they *“should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.”*

Paul identifies the covenant by which men truly serve God, the Gospel, as *“in the newness of the Spirit.”* It is *“new”* because of its better features and better blessings (Hebrews 8:6; 12:24). It is *“of the Spirit”* because it is *“the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus”* (Romans 8:1; cf. John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13). It is also *“of the Spirit”* because the Gospel *“quickeneth”* or *“giveth life”* (2 Corinthians 3:4-6; cf. John 6:63). *“The letter”* designates the Law of Moses which was a *“ministration of death”* that *“killeth”* (Romans 7:10; cf. Galatians 3:10). It is the *“new man”* (Romans 6:4-7) who walks after the Spirit and serves the Spirit, whereas, it was the *“old man of sin”* that wanted to serve through the *“oldness of letter,”* the Law of Moses, only *“to bring forth fruit unto death”* (Romans 7:5; cf. 6:21-23).

Is the Law Sin?

“What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead. For I was alive without the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me. Wherefore the laws is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceedingly sinful” (Romans 7:7-13).

Paul is anticipating and answering an objection raised by the sect of the circumcision (cf. Romans 3:1-8; 4:15; 5:13). It seems ludicrous, but it is posed as an absurd consequence in rebuttal to Paul’s rejection of the Law. The Judaizer rejected Paul’s argument in favor of the Gospel by asserting the Gospel charges the Law with

responsibility for sin. However, Paul responds by making it clear that the Law functioned just as it was intended; it condemned sin (Romans 3:19; Galatians 3:19). In the absence of the Law there is no knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20; 4:15; 5:13); sin is dead. But where there is the Law, sin “jumps to life,” that is, it is a reality that cannot be ignored by the conscience. The Law then becomes the occasion by which a man of conscience is slain and compelled to confront the effects of sin upon his soul. Paul puts the blame for spiritual death where it rightly belongs on sin (Romans 7:11, 13). In doing so he exalts the Law as holy, just and good.

Paul is not saying that the Law was imposed arbitrarily. In a universe where there is freedom of choice, there must be right and wrong, good and evil, *“For until the Law sin was in the world ...it was added because of transgressions.”* Paul’s conclusion is the Law is not responsible for sin, but sin necessitated the Law. The Law had the effect of bringing condemnation only because it is not the function of the Law to justify the sinner; the Law only justifies the Law keeper (Galatians 3:10, 12, 21).

Therefore, the Law was given *“that sin by the commandment might become exceedingly sinful”* (Romans 7:13). Through the Law men *“in the flesh”* were convicted of their sins (Romans 3:20; cf. Psalm 119:11; 37:31). God’s purpose in the Law was to reveal His disposition toward sin and persuaded the Jew’s of their need for a Saviour. As we have already established, Paul is the prototypical Jew convicted of his guilt by the Law crying out for a means of justification and reconciliation to God.

I Am Carnal Sold Under Sin!

“For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not; for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing:

for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would do I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells in me.” (Romans 7:14-20).

The Law is *“spiritual”* opposed to Paul being *“carnal.”* Paul is not comparing the Law to the Gospel, but comparing the Law to himself, himself slain through it by sin (Romans 7:11). The Law approves righteous behavior, behavior that leads to life (Romans 7:10). This is the spiritual character to which Paul refers. It is this contrast which is the basis for the comparison that follows.

These verses, while intriguing by reason of their alliteration in the KJV, are made difficult to the modern reader. Consider them as presented in the NKJV:

“For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.”

Consider also the MKJV:

“For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do, I know not. For what I desire, that I do not do; but what I hate, that I do. If then I do that which I do not desire, I consent to the law that it is good. But now it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwells no good thing. For to will is present

with me, but how to perform that which is good I do not find. For I do not do the good that I desire; but the evil which I do not will, that I do. But if I do what I do not desire, it is no more I working it out, but sin dwelling in me."

With these two renditions of the text before us, we can begin to understand Paul and the dilemma with which he, and every sincere Jew under the Law, wrestled. That which Paul "did" was sin, transgress the Law, resulting in the death of condemnation (Romans 7:11; cf. Genesis 2:17). Paul is not saying he was ignorant or unaware of what he was doing, or that he was unable to resist the temptation to sin. Rather, Paul affirms that he did not fully grasp the consequences of what he accomplished by his transgression until he was confronted by the Law and the deception perpetrated upon his mind was fully comprehended. Just as Satan had deceived Eve with his lie, "*Ye shall not surely die,*" so Paul, and ultimately all are deceived (Romans 3:23; 5:14). Is it reasonable to oppose Paul and affirm that men are led into sin fully comprehending the devastating consequences of their transgression (Romans 6:23a)?

What Paul desired was to be righteous, but "*that I do not do.*" Again, it is not for lack of ability to understand the commandment, neither is it a total inability to repent and turn. Rather, Paul faces the reality that "*in my flesh dwelleth no good thing.*" He cannot work his way out of condemnation. The Law requires compliance every time. Successive obedience does not ameliorate prior transgression. In the face of even only one sin (if such were the case), the Law finds fault with the sinner (Hebrews 7:11, 18; 8:8). Sin is a hole out of which one cannot dig himself, "*to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I do not find.*" Faced with this reality, Paul laments "*I am carnal sold under sin.*"

As a sincere Jew, Paul had the desire to serve and please God. Yet, Satan deceived him. He yielded and transgressed. In remorse he turned again to God and the Law, but he found nothing

there but condemnation and a standard for perfection. In desperation he sought a path to righteousness but found himself entangled more and more in sin. In this predicament, the sincere Jew acknowledged the goodness of God and His Law yearning for fellowship with him while realizing his sins were for him an insurmountable obstacle to that end. "I am carnal sold under sin ... O wretched man that I am..."

I See Another Law

"I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man; but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Romans 7:21-24).

At this juncture, Paul contrasts "*another law*" with "*the law of my mind.*" This latter "*law of my mind*" is the same as that to which he consented (Romans 7:16) and "*the good that I would*" (Romans 7:19). It is what he in his "mind" willed to do but could not "perform" because "evil is present" (Romans 7:21). He calls the other law the "*law of sin*" because do as he would, the guilt of sin was still a reality making his "*members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity*" (Romans 6:19). This is the "*dominion*" which sin has in the absence of the Gospel which brings real justification, pardon and forgiveness through the grace of God in Christ (Romans 6:14). If the Jew rejected Jesus, this was the damning predicament in which they remained.

Notice that Paul creates a dichotomy between the "inward man" and "my members," which he also calls "the flesh." This "inward man" is the man who wants to serve God and be righteous, free from the guilt of sin. He knows he is a sinner, but the Law of Moses only presents him with condemnation. "The flesh" is the same man in bondage to sin under the Law of Moses. He is circumcised. He wears fringe on his garments. He eats only clean meats and rests on the

Sabbath. Yet, none of these things frees his “members” from the dominion of the sins of which He is guilty. He is in “captivity to the law of sin which is in [his] members.”

In desperation this man cries out, “*O wretched man that I am who shall deliver me from the body of this death.*” For emphasis, notice again how these words cannot possibly be those of a faithful Christian (Romans 6:20-23; 8:1-2). The believing Jew is delivered from the bondage to sin, as are all believers (Romans 6:12-14). Sin does not have dominion over the Christian. His members are not the servants of sin, but of righteousness. They produce not death (Romans 6:16) but fruit unto holiness and everlasting life (Romans 6:21-22). He has yielded himself unto God and by His grace and the power of the blood of Christ unto salvation, he is free from the law of sin and death that once ruled in his members.

“I Thank God!”

Paul’s concluding exclamation of thanksgiving announces the solution to the problem which every sincere Jew faced. Without

Jesus the Jews were lost and undone. Jesus, the Christ, was their Saviour who had offered Himself as a propitiation through faith in His blood (Romans 3:25). There is a present cleansing and right standing for everyone who seeks God through the Spirit, i.e., according to the teaching of the Holy Spirit and with a heart, a mind, the inward man who truly desires to do what is right trusting in the merits of the death of Jesus and not in the works of our members according to the teachings of the Law of Moses, “*after the flesh*” (Romans 8:1-2). When Paul says it is “*with the mind,*” he has in view according to the faith of the Gospel (Romans 8:3-11; cf. Romans 1:28; 7:23, 25; 8:5, 7, 27; 12:2, 16; 15:5; also Romans 3:22; 4:5; 9:30-32; 10:8). When he says “*after the flesh*” he has in view the works of the Law of Moses by which no man is justified.

The system of justification by grace through faith has set us free from the dominion of sins and created us as new creatures trusting and obeying the Christ. We are relying upon His death to cover our sins; not our works, nor our lineage, not circumcision or uncircumcision, only the death of the Son of God.

Equipping The Saints

SEAN CAVENDER | BALD KNOB, ARKANSAS

Our Lord Jesus Christ gave His life to purchase the church with His blood (Matthew 16:18; Acts 20:28). Those who are saved by His blood are added to His church, becoming His people and part of the spiritual family of God (Acts 2:41-47; 1 Timothy 3:15). These saints assemble regularly on the first day of the week (and at other times) to worship and spend time together studying God's word (Acts 20:7; Hebrews 10:25). At the first, the apostles took on a special role in the church at Jerusalem, preaching the word. When a complaint arose among the Jerusalem saints, the apostles called on the church to appoint seven men who would be capable of taking care of the physical needs of widows. Later, as Paul began his missionary journeys, he established local congregations, eventually organizing them with elders (Acts 14:23). Paul also addressed deacons in the church as the ones who had the responsibility to minister and serve the congregations where they were members (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8-13).

These congregations, organized with elders and deacons, became a community for Christians which had their share of problems, successes, disappointments, and trials. Paul and other apostles wrote letters to the churches to help them become more Christ-like. Congregations became bases of missionary work, spreading the gospel throughout the world. They were called upon to love their fellow Christians and help them by sending financial aid when disaster struck Christians throughout the world. Churches practicing evangelism and benevolent work is clearly seen in the New Testament.

As you spend time reading the New Testament



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letters, it becomes obvious that there are other aspects to the function and work of the church. The apostles expected the members of local congregations to work together leading to growth. Not necessarily numerically, but in the knowledge of the Scriptures, fervency in worship, and wisdom in the application of truth. One of the primary works of the church is to equip all of the saints among the churches to better service and ministry.

Equipped to Work

*“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;”
(Ephesians 4:11–12, NASB95)*

The apostle Paul identified the role of evangelists, apostles, prophets, pastors, and teachers. These were various functions within the body of Christ and each had a slightly different purpose and use. However, they had a common purpose of equipping saints. In this text, Paul was addressing the church-at-large and all its members. All saints are to be equipped for the work of service. We cannot overlook this fact. While there may be different roles and functions within the body of Christ, every member has a purpose and is expected to participate in the service and ministry of the church.

Members of the church are expected to grow so they may help other Christians grow. One of the first ways we help people grow is through the study of the Scriptures. Notice the roles that Christ established in the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—all of these focus on teaching the word of God. Just a few verses later, Paul would tell us to teach the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Teaching the word of God leads to edification and building up the brethren in faith and knowledge of the word of God. The apostle Paul taught the gospel of grace for the strengthening and building up of the church (Acts 20:32).

Strengthening our congregations in the knowledge of the Scriptures is important, not just so we will know and practice the truth, but also to avoid the chaos of false teaching. In Ephesians 4, while Paul was encouraging the saints to equip one another, he warned of the way that false teaching can mislead and harm the church (Ephesians 4:14).

One of the greatest dangers for many churches is that Christians are not growing in the knowledge of the word of God. Many Christians view the teachers, preachers, and elders as the exclusive possessors of knowledge needed for the church. We make a distinction between those who are in “ministry” and the “rest of the church.” Every Christian who has sought the forgiveness of sins and to be in a right relationship with God has also made a commitment to grow up in the stature of Christ. Paul told the Ephesians that their standard of measurement was Jesus Christ, *“until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ”* (Ephesians 4:13, NASB95). Jesus is our goal and we all have a responsibility to grow and work for the Lord.

One of the most effective ways churches have enabled and equipped Christians with opportunities to grow in the knowledge of the

truth is through Bible classes. A Bible class offers teachers the opportunity to use their gift of teaching, sharing knowledge and insights with participants. Studying a variety of topics will prove helpful, as we expand the base of our knowledge. For our faith to grow, we need to prepare for Bible classes, attend classes, and be good listeners and participants. As we grow and learn, we should each strive to become teachers. The Hebrew writer stated, *“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food”* (Hebrews 5:12, NASB95). Each and every Christian is expected to grow and master what they know. Most teachers will readily admit that they learn more by studying and preparing to teach, rather than when they are just students. If you are not regularly attending Bible classes, then do not expect your knowledge of God’s word to grow. In fact, you will eventually need to be taught again the elementary principles of the word of God! If you attend classes but are not diligently preparing and studying for class, then make it a goal to do better. By preparing for class and making comments, the teacher will be encouraged by your efforts, and you will find yourself growing in faith. If you do not show up for classes or you are ill-prepared, then your lack of involvement will be a discouragement to the teacher and to the rest of the congregation.

Every member has something to offer for the ministry of the saints. Equipping the church is like the grease that keeps the wheels turning. If a church practices brotherly love, hospitality, and benevolence, you will find many members who are growing and being strengthened in their faith. A church that is evangelistic and makes sharing the word of God in the neighborhood an important part of their work is a congregation which understands the effect edification will have on the work of the local church. We cannot over-emphasize the work of edification, nor should we

neglect its value in helping the church function as it ought to.

The apostle Paul wrote, “*from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love*” (Ephesians 4:16, NASB95). Notice the underlined words. You are responsible for the growth of the church. Not just the preacher, not just the elders. You. Cultivating the church begins with you and your personal commitment to grow.

How To Serve In Ministry To the Saints

I would suggest that no deed or action is too small. Maybe you are not prepared to jump in and be a full-time Bible class teacher. No worries! Begin with something small and do that job well. Maybe you can begin by just making a better commitment to attend classes regularly or participating in the worship services. You could start by being at the church building early and greeting your brothers and sisters in Christ as they come in to worship. Whatever you do, do it well.

1. Attend and participate in Bible classes
2. Write cards and notes of encouragement
3. Study the Scriptures daily
4. Worship the Lord with fellow Christians whenever the church assembles

5. Sing enthusiastically.
6. Encourage other Christians
7. Lead in public worship
8. Read Scripture
9. Volunteer to give someone a ride to worship
10. Say something encouraging to the elders, deacons, and preachers
11. Be kind
12. Show hospitality
13. Pray with and for the church
14. Preach sermons
15. Teach Bible classes
16. Don't complain; focus your energy on encouragement
17. Arrange a Bible study with a friend, co-worker, family member, or neighbor
18. Teach a Bible study
19. Preparing your Bible class lessons
20. Help keep up the facilities and prepare the building for worship

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of things to do in and for the church. It is meant for you to get a few ideas and be a more active, prominent member of the local church. Consider your brothers and sisters in the local church and think of how you can take on a more active role in helping them. Minister to them and you will be an encouragement to them and you will be encouraged yourself as well!

The Difference Between Emotion And Emotionalism in Worship

WILLIAM STEWART | KINGSTON, ONTARIO

The story has been told of a man who visited a local church for their Sunday assembly. Upon hearing a powerful point from the pulpit, he hollered out, “Amen!” Everyone was quiet, somewhat taken back by his outburst. Minutes later, the preacher spoke mightily of the Lord’s victory over death, which prompted the man to give a hearty, “Praise the Lord!” Others in the crowd were visibly uncomfortable with these eruptions. After this second time, someone quietly went over to the man and whispered, “Why are you shouting out like that?” The visitor replied, “I’m praising God.” In response, he heard, “Well, we don’t do that here.”

Sadly, this might be an accurate representation of the exceptionally subdued approach some take regarding the display of emotion in worship. On the other end of the spectrum, you find cunningly orchestrated music used to establish the atmosphere; an emotionally charged evangelist spurring people on with repetitive chants; the hands and bodies swaying to and fro of seemingly mesmerized adherents. As the crowd is further worked into a frenzy, folks may end up rolling about in the aisles, bursting out in uncontrollable laughter, shaking, trembling, jumping, and shouting unintelligible speech.

One writer has said, *“Truth without emotion produces dead orthodoxy and a church full of artificial admirers... On the other hand, emotion without truth produces empty frenzy and cultivates shallow people who refuse the discipline of rigorous thought. But true worship comes from people who are deeply emotional and who love deep and sound doctrine. Strong affections for God rooted in truth are the bone*



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*and marrow of Biblical worship.”*¹ Without doubt, emotions have a place in worship. They are God-given, and when kindled and handled properly, worshippers are edified and God is glorified. However, when they are misused, they beget emotionalism – a profane worship. Webster’s defines emotionalism as “...undue indulgence in or display of emotion...”² When “undue indulgence” is given to emotion, the result is more akin to a circus of giddy drunkards than a worship assembly. Displays of unbridled emotion do not give glory to God.

Experiences based solely upon feelings and void of Biblical validity have increasingly become the norm in our religious world. Years ago, while perusing an atheist site, I came across a statement which accurately summarized the results of emotionalism in worship. It is “...used to bring about a sort of altered state of awareness and emotion that does make one more susceptible to make choices you might not normally (like convert) or believe you have experienced a supernatural occurrence.”³ This reminded me of a faith healing service that I

attended about 15 years ago. All manner of emotional manipulation was used to energize the crowd, to create a buzz among the people, to spellbind the audience in preparation for the supernatural experience they were about to have. One can easily get caught up in the moment, get high from the emotion, I've even heard it likened to a hypnotic state – but understand, this is not godly worship.

The Bible identifies the heart as the center of man's intellect (Matthew 13:15, 22), emotions (Matthew 22:37), conscience (Acts 23:1), and volition (Hebrews 4:12). If we are to use our heart appropriately, we cannot forsake any of these. If our heart is to rightly engage in worship of the Almighty God, it must be a conscious decision, combining both our intellect and our emotions. Never should emotions be permitted to override intellect. Our emotions in worship must be a response to our intellectual acknowledgment and acceptance of God, His will, and what He has done for us. When emotions are given dominion, our worship is no longer emotional praise to God based in the facts of His word, but emotionalism, void of intellectual subjection to the will of God.

Worshipping God ought to give rise to a variety of emotions: contrition and sorrow for sin, a fervent longing to be in the presence of God, a trembling awe of the glory of His presence and greatness of His power, thanksgiving for the blessings of God, rejoicing and hope for the salvation which God supplies. Emotion is necessary, but it cannot be the basis of our faith and worship, nor is it an end to itself. Welling up emotions for the sake of being emotional is not sincere worship. It is emotionalism. If we as individuals, and collectively as an assembly of God's people, do not find our emotions engaged when we worship the Lord, something is wrong. The display of emotion is not irreverent. Praise to God should come from hearts that are bursting with love and adoration for our Lord and Saviour. Our prayers should be heartfelt

petitions and occasions of intimate conversation with Jehovah God. If you are moved to tears when seated at the Lord's table, good. What else should we expect when faced with our culpability in the Lord's death coupled with the immeasurable love of God in planning for Him to be the sacrifice for our sins? The reading and preaching of Scripture should stir our emotions, and if we are moved to shout "Amen," then shout, "Amen." It is not irreverent to declare your agreement with God's word.

We need to go no further than the book of Psalms to understand that worshipping God is an emotional experience. David wrote, *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart – these, O God, You will not despise"* (Psalm 51:17). Contrition necessitates emotion; but not unchecked emotion. In the Psalm, we are witness to the weight of sorrow David's sin brought upon him, and his thankfulness for God's mercy. That's an emotional response to the knowledge of God and His ways; it is not emotion for the sake of emotion.

Again, the psalmist records, *"As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they continually say to me, 'Where is your God?' When I remember these things, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast"* (Psalm 42:1-4). Does your soul pant and thirst for the Lord? This is not a humdrum hollow approach to God. The heart of the worshiper is engaged. The mundane church member is clueless about what it means to pour out one's soul. It requires our affections be kindled and not suppressed. But it is a conscious response to the Lord, to His character and to what He has accomplished for us; it is not a "no holds barred" audacious deluge of hysteria.

Once more, the Psalmist wrote, *“Make a joyful shout to the LORD, all you lands! Serve the LORD with gladness; come before His presence with singing. Know that the LORD, He is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name. for the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations”* (Psalm 100). A joyful sound does not come from that which is monotone and lifeless. But, as much as uninhabited worship is unbecoming of those who approach the God of the living; an uninhibited and clamorous appeal is equally out of place. We should come before God with emotion, but not driven by emotion.

Let us be diligent students of God’s word and enter worship with a readiness to give glory to God and encouragement to our brethren. If we do so, our emotions will most certainly be triggered, as will the emotions of all others who have prepared themselves for worship – but not as the product of human manipulation or manufactured mania, but by our desire to uplift the name of God, in accordance with His will.

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1. Piper, J. (DESIRING GOD: MEDITATIONS OF A CHRISTIAN HEDONIST, Multnomah Press, 1986)
 2. Merriam-Webster’s Deluxe Dictionary, tenth collegiate edition, The Reader’s Digest Association, Inc. 1998.
 3. NeoApostate, Internet Infidels Discussion Forum (NOTE, this forum no longer exists)

Our Beautiful Hope

T. SEAN SULLIVAN | PARAGOULD, ARKANSAS

Introduction

The Apostle Peter in 2 Peter 3:15-16 makes us aware of the fact that Paul's inspired writings can be "hard to understand." Among the most difficult is arguably Paul's letter to the Romans and within that letter, perhaps, chapter seven is at the top.

That being said, if we properly understand Romans 7, in its natural context, we will embrace the glorious hope of our better covenant. Yes, there are some phrases within its 25 verses that are certainly difficult, but it is the overall picture that brings us the joy of one very special word. That word is "forgiveness." Forgiveness is a glaring contrast between the Law of the Moses (the Old Law) and the New Covenant (the Law of Christ).

Let's consider the beautiful blessing of forgiveness as the practical application of Romans 7.

The Old Law Couldn't...

The purpose of the Old Law was perfect. It did what it was supposed to do. The Law, in its time, defined and directed the people of God—the *Children of Israel*. Their Covenant taught them morals, directed their lives in serving God, and preserved the people until all could be fulfilled. Of course, the most obvious hope of the Old Law was the assurance of a line through which the Messiah would arrive.

Even with the ability to accomplish all these things, there was still something lacking. The Old Law couldn't do anything except point out what was "right" and "wrong." In fact, as Paul says in Romans 7:8, that the definition of that which is "right" also provides an understanding of what is "wrong." That "understanding of



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wrong" compels some to seek out the forbidden and certainly gives Satan an avenue of temptation to intrigue the souls of men. It is in that scenario that the Old Law's greatest weakness was exposed.

Under the Old Law there was no scheme of redemption, no sacrifice that truly removed the sins that were committed. Even with its "required sacrifices" there was no true forgiveness in a present way. In the tenth chapter of Hebrews we read, *"For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins."*

Recall what Ezekiel 18:0 says, *"The soul who sins shall die."* This death, albeit "spiritual," was still an unbroken barrier between the sinner and righteousness. For the people of Israel, forgiveness was wrapped up in their future hope

of the Messiah (Galatians 4:4-5). The Messiah would eventually fulfill the redemption price necessary for their sins to be forgiven (Hebrews 9:15-17).

The New Covenant Can...

The New Covenant is the hoped for, promised, and prophesied result of God's eternal purpose. There were hundreds of prophecies concerning the Messiah that would be exactly fulfilled to bring this Covenant to order. There was no mistaking the arrival and the identity of the One who would come to *"take away the sins of the world"* (John 1:29). Jesus came to this world to be the sacrifice that we could not provide for ourselves (Hebrews 9:23-28). This was the fulfillment of God's eternal hope for mankind (Ephesians 1:4; Revelation 13:8).

Consider once again Hebrews 10, this time verses 5 through 10, that says, *"Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: 'Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, But a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come—In the volume of the book it is written of Me —To do Your will, O God.'" Previously saying, "Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them"(which are offered according to the law), then He said, "Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God." He takes away the first that He may establish the second. By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*" Because the blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, fulfilled the requirement of our forgiveness, we now have a greater hope of being forgiven by God when we transgress His will and willingly return (Hebrews 10:17-18). Under the New Covenant the sinner can be redeemed, forgiven, and restored to a

righteous relationship with God.

Forgiveness is Beautiful

Paul could hardly believe that his own brethren, those who had discovered the redemption of the blood of Jesus, could ever be falling for a hopeless law of "sin and death." When the Old Law was still in effect, it at least had some future hope; but now, it is obsolete and without any hope whatsoever. Paul's astonishment was clear in Galatians 1:6, as he marveled that the brethren in Galatia were so easily beguiled and taken away.

In Romans 7, Paul describes the state of being under the Law of Moses and without hope in this life. The words he uses are anything but attractive. In fact, the strongest of them is arguably verse 24 where Paul personates one "under the law" and declares them "wretched" and attached to a "body of death." These dark and looming words were to open the eyes of the brethren so they might see the hopeless trap of following the Old Law that would not and could not save their souls.

The cleansed conscience found through God's forgiveness in the New Covenant is a tremendous relief. Yes, we still from time-to-time transgress, so sin is still a problem even for Christians (1 John 1:8), but we have the possibility of forgiveness to restore us (1 John 1:9). The value of our soul's salvation and the cost of our forgiveness must compel us to greater dedication to doing God's will, with self-control and a refusal to allow our fleshly desires to take charge. The eager anticipation of a welcome in Heaven is a beautiful thing, which the forgiven enjoy (2 Peter 3:9-13).

Conclusion:

We can take, even the best of things, for granted. We seem to have a propensity for discounting the value of almost everything. Yes, even the forgiveness of our sins is something from which some have walked away.

Paul warns in Romans 7 that there is no other way than Jesus and His words – *the New Covenant*. The

Law of Moses is not an option for gaining hope. This same warning would obviously include any of the multiplying-doctrines that mislead men and take souls away from truth.

Having the hope of forgiveness is great, however, actually achieving forgiveness is far

better. Do not sell yourself under any plan is not the proven truth of God (Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 2:15). Come, bring your life to God, through Jesus Christ our Savior, and find the beautiful hope of forgiveness, and all that it brings in this life and beyond.

Harvest, What Harvest? Two Obstacles to Evangelism

TREY HASKETT | TUPELO, MISSISSIPPI

Get in, get out, get on. Anybody else's dad have that philosophy on road trip pitstops? Rarely were there roses, but when there were, there was little time to stop and smell them. It was about getting from point A to point B as quickly as possible. Accordingly, pitstops were often few and far between and when we did stop it was about getting whatever we needed and getting on our way.

John 4 records a road trip Jesus and His disciples made from Judea to Galilee. Interestingly, the apostle John, unlike most dads turned road-trip-warrior, was more concerned about the pitstop than the actual destination (only vv. 46-54 deal with their time in Galilee, the rest of the chapter is about what happened in Samaria). In recording the goings-on of what would ordinarily be nothing more than a blip on our radar, John endeavored to communicate an important message to his readers and to us about the nature of evangelism and some common obstacles that stand in our way.

Tired and hungry, Jesus and His disciples stopped in Samaria, probably with much the same queasiness that we feel when stopping at the nearly dilapidated service station in the middle of the boonies. You see, Jews had no dealings with Samaritans (v. 9). To the Jews, calling someone a 'Samaritan' was an insult (ironically one would be applied to Jesus just a few chapters later 8.48). Samaritans were a mixed race with a long history of mingling with the profane Gentiles. Further, they were known for rejecting much of God's revealed word and worshipped in a way that was abominable to the Jews. Some Jews wouldn't even go through Samaria, preferring to take the longer route through Perea. But Jesus and His disciples took the quicker, if less preferable route, through



Sharper than the black ink on the white pages on which they are written are the contrasts John records that help us to see the purpose of the pitstop. The disciples stopped for one purpose. They were hungry. They needed to refuel. Jesus however, was interested in demonstrating a different source. Here lies the first contrast John wishes us to see. Where do we derive our true sustenance? From physical food or spiritual? And so in his narration, John highlights two of the most fundamental needs food and water. First, he records Jesus engaging a Samaritan woman by a well in a discussion about water only to turn it into a candid conversation about the living water He offers. By the end of the conversation the woman had abandoned the former in search of the latter (vv. 29-30). Meanwhile, Jesus' disciples had gone into the city to get something to eat (v. 8). Coming back and finding Jesus talking with the woman, they urged Him to eat but He was already full (v. 31). Both Jesus and His disciples had "eaten" but unlike the disciples what sustained Jesus was more than mere bread, He was sustained by accomplishing the will and the work of the Father. Doing the will of the Father, in this context, meant preaching to the Samaritans (v. 34)! This was more than a statement about sustenance it is also a

statement about satisfaction! For Jesus, His true joy and delight was found in fulfilling the Father's will of leading lost souls to return to the Father. What message are we supposed to take from all of this? Better yet, what message were Jesus' disciples supposed to take from all of this? If they were going to be followers of Jesus, eventually taking His gospel to the world, they needed to be people who hungered for and found their fulfillment in the work of bringing that message to lost people. Is that our joy and delight? Or have we, like Jesus' disciples, become satisfied with mere food and drink? With recreation and leisure? With football games and TV shows? What gives us more joy? How long can you (you personally) go without physical food? Pair that with the next question, how long has it been since told somebody about Jesus and His kingdom? We speak often in exaggerated terms to describe our hunger. "I'm starving," we say. When's the last time you felt that sort of hunger, that sort of desire to be filled with doing the will of God? What things are we busy filling our lives with to the neglect of the satisfying and sustaining work of leading lost souls back to God? Obstacle to evangelism #1: focused on the wrong kind of "food".

We've already alluded to the differences between Jews and Samaritans. John 4 shows this in a number of ways: 1) The journey from the Jewish region of Judea to the Jewish region of Galilee that ironically focuses much time both textually (vv. 4-42) and temporally in the Samaritan town of Sychar (Jesus turned what would've typically been a three day road trip into a five day excursion all so that He and His disciples could preach the gospel to the Samaritans). 2) The conversation between Jesus, a Jew, and a Samaritan woman, and statements about whether the Jews or the Samaritans worshipped in the proper place. 3) Finally, the contrast between the Jews and Samaritans works itself out in a subtle way in Jesus' invitation to His disciples to join His

mission (vv. 34-38).

Jesus endeavored to elevate the disciples' purposes and priorities from the physical by inviting them to a harvest not of grains but of souls. It is interesting to note, however, that, in the process of issuing the invitation, Jesus has to tell His disciples to open their eyes and see the potential harvest (vv. 35). The question becomes, why didn't they see it?

On one level we've already learned that their heightened focus on finding the physical food blinded them to the greater spiritual sustenance they should have been seeking. Beyond that, however, it seems John is trying to indicate that they also had cultural and social blinders that hindered them from bringing the gospel to the lost in Sychar. John does this by drawing our attention to Jesus' willingness to cross the social and cultural barriers that most good Jews would never have dreamed of doing. The disciples are focused on getting to Galilee where they can continue bringing the gospel to the Jews. Never would they have imagined that the pitstop in podunk Samaria was about anything more than getting in, getting out, and getting on. What would God want with a bunch of Samaritans? But Jesus said their harvest was part of the will and work of God (v. 34)! They probably would've looked at the Samaritans as dry, rocky ground. "Harvest, what harvest Jesus? All we see are a bunch of Samaritans." And Jesus responds as if to say "exactly." Who are the Samaritans in your life who need the gospel? Who are the people that we might be prone to avoid based on their appearance, background, culture, and religious differences who need the gospel? Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. We have no dealings with _____. (Fill in the blank). Who is that for us? Who is that for you? Maybe its the tattooed co-worker, the profane family member, the neighbor of a different race, the homosexual salesperson, the Muslim guy who owns the gas station. Are we writing these people off as dry, rocky ground? Are we waiting for a harvest that

John 4 demonstrates that Jesus was not concerned with just getting in, getting out, and getting on. Sychar was not just the unfortunate, albeit it necessary, pitstop to fill their bellies on their journey to somewhere better. It was a place to be truly fed, not with physical food but by consuming and being consumed by the work of God. The Samaritans were not an unclean people to be avoided at all costs but were prime candidates for the gospel and potential members of God's kingdom. May God open our eyes to see those who need Him and may we hunger for their salvation.

The Christian & Social Media

JEREMY WOODMAN | KINGSTON, ONTARIO

When Christ gave the Great Commission he defiled the scope of the commission s “all the world” and the message as “the gospel,” but He left the mode of communication up to the apostles. *In the first century, communication was through the spoken and written word. The range of oral communication was limited and if the message didn’t produce change, it lasted no longer than the audience’s memory. Writing could reach more people and its contents lasted longer but making and distributing copies was labour intensive.*

Come forward to the 20th century and the telephone, radio, and television revolutionized communications, helping to disseminate the gospel in new ways to new audiences. In recent decades the rise of the internet, higher rates of personal computer ownership, and the development of social media have revolutionized communications again. Because of social media, we can communicate cheaply and quickly with almost anyone around the world. We can create content for others to access at their convenience. These are blessings the apostles did not have and are tools we can use to fulfill the Great Commission.

This article focuses on social media and the Christian’s relationship with it. Social media is like any tool that can be used well or poorly. We need to consider the positive role social media can (and should) have, but also how we should react and respond to content we disagree with. I’ll be referring to Facebook exclusively because it is the social networking website most people, myself included, are familiar with but the principles can be applied to other social media platforms (i.e. Twitter).



Many Christians use Facebook to share Christian content with their contacts. They respond to posts, explaining the gospel to complete strangers that may never have had a chance to hear the truth otherwise. Facebook can allow people of the world to see what Christians are actually like and counter the negative image the media promotes. And it can assist with benevolent undertakings. When disaster strikes we now know about it immediately and can send relief to brethren in short order.

But, sadly, there are times when Christians share content with others that is questionable at best or blatantly immoral. I’ve seen brethren write some nasty, derogatory posts while arguing with strangers or even fellow Christians! One of the well documented negative phenomena of social media is that these types of discussions, fueled in part by anonymity, tend to rapidly degenerate, into name calling and personal attacks, with wild assumptions made about the person on the other end of the conversation.

To be blunt, based solely on some people’s posts, if I didn’t know them already I would never guess they were a Christian. We don’t want that to be said of us but how do we avoid the pitfalls of social media? What should we do when we encounter content that offends us? We need to

apply the basic principles found in two bible verses, which I suggest committing to memory, Matthew 12:36 and James 1:19.

The first principle is understanding that *what you post on social media is speech* and subject to all the biblical verses about speech. This is easy to forget when we are in the privacy of our home, behind a keyboard, and unable to see the person we are communicating with. Written words are just as subject to Jesus's teachings as spoken ones. Jesus warned, *"every idle word men may speak they will give account of it in the day of judgment"* (Matthew 12:36).

Unless you are chatting via private messenger, or are posting within a predefined group, what you are saying is public. Picture yourself on a pleasant day in your town's local farmers' market, surrounded by strangers. You run across someone you recognize and you begin a conversation with that person. It starts well but then the conversation turns sour and you start disagreeing with each other. In "real life" you would remain civil because you understand that everyone around you can hear what you are saying. You'd keep your voice low, or maybe agree to discuss this somewhere more private, or at another time. It is doubtful you'd get into a shouting match and try to drag nearby people into the argument. Well it is no different in the digital marketplace except the audience is larger and the words linger, sometimes permanently.

The second principle deals with our attitude, James admonishes *"every man [to] be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath"* (James 1:19) Being "swift to hear" requires us to make an attempt to understand what the other party is saying. This is much more than just staying silent while the other person is talking. Often times when we are silent we are just waiting for them to finish so we can have our say. We weren't truly listening.

Online discussions, usually ones that stray into politics, are notorious for making assumptions and discussions (d)evolve based on those assumptions. Someone states their opinion and

another person reasons, "oh, because they believe X they must also believe Y and Z," and starts conversing with them as if that were true. Labels such as "liberal," "conservative," "progressive," "socialist," "right-wing," "left-wing" can be useful shorthand (usually just in conversations with like-minded people) but just as often they are associations that are used to dismiss another person's presumed viewpoints ('oh, of course, you believe that because you are a ____'). Friends, unless we already know the person, or they make their other positions clear the wiser course is to stick to the subject at hand or ask questions that help clarify rather than make assumptions.

Where does this desire to be right, to have the last word, to respond with the witty retort, to drag others unto our side come from? Pride. It is the opposite of a Christ-like spirit of love. What opportunities to preach the gospel are we squandering because we are too busy shaming, rather than, "in humility correcting those who are in opposition" (2 Timothy 2:25)?

The third principle is the application of "slow to speak," which should start with the question "is this worth responding to?" Our time is limited and we must all pick our battles. Some discussions, even ones where we disagree, can be profitable and others can generate all heat and no proverbial light. This requires experience, discretion, and wisdom to distinguish between the profitable discussions or those that end up wasting our times. Generally, we should avoid conversations if a person is using foul language, language that is baiting others into conflict, escalating conflict, and mocking others. These conversations should be avoided and if we have control over a thread it may be prudent to delete the comments as well. We are enabling conflict if we respond. Solomon instructs us to *"not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him"* (Proverbs 26:20). Steer clear!

Generally speaking, if we are swift to listen and slow to speak then we will be slow to wrath. The three reinforce each other. If you have listened to the other person and feel you need to respond, take an additional second and ask yourself, “am I angry?” If you are, take some time to calm down. This can be very hard to do but James reveals why it is important in the next verse. “The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (James 1:20). A response in anger to someone often provokes a response in anger back from the other party and a vicious cycle ensues. An injured person seeking retribution for themselves may retaliate greatly out of proportion to the injustice they think has been done to them. Words spoken in anger can destroy relationships. It may take years to restore them if they are ever restored. Some of us may have learned this the hard way.

As an aside, a little bit of self-awareness can save a lot of headaches. If we are the type of person who is easily offended it may be best to limit our involvement with social media or limit the kind of content we see by making use of filters. This is not a technical article but a quick internet search will lead to resources that can show you how to do this.

The world will behave as the world does. They are under the sway of darkness. We can’t control that. But we can control our response. Like it or not the onus is on us to be the responsible ones. “As much as depends on you live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18) and “let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt” (Colossians 4:6). This doesn’t mean that our words have to be sugary sweet, sometimes blunt is needed, but it does mean that we respond with the cause of Christ in mind and not the cause of pride.

In conclusion, before we respond to a post we disagree with, we should ask ourselves: a) is this worth it? b) is this the best place for this discussion? c) am I responding from anger or pride? Our responses should be becoming of a Christian, influencing the world, not influenced by it. We have an effective tool at our disposal to reach people with the message of salvation. Hopefully we use that tool well but sometimes we may falter. Fortunately, we serve a loving God who is ready to forgive when we repent. We can turn around and commit to doing better.

JANUARY 2019 PREVIEW

EXPOSITORY ARTICLE

Shane Carrington discusses the idea of us being “living stones” in 1 Peter 2.

CHURCH ARTICLE

Josh Welch focuses on the need for us to be effective members of the body of Christ.

WORSHIP ARTICLE

Colton McDaniel will encourage us concerning our worship in song.

APPLICATION ARTICLE

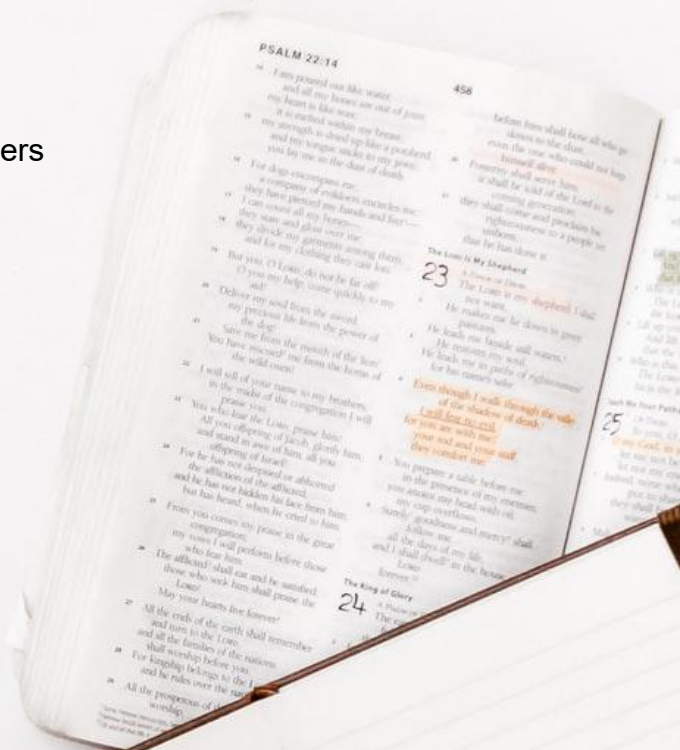
William Stewart will address our spiritual sacrifices to the Lord from 1 Peter 2.

EVANGELISM ARTICLE

Sean Cavender will help us prepare to share God's word with preaching that converts.

BEYOND THE BASICS ARTICLE

Chuck Bartlett will urge us to have confidence, but not overconfidence in our salvation.



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EDITOR / DESIGNER

Sean P. Cavender

William J. Stewart