

# Weigh Down Workshop — A Cult?

by Don and Joy Veinot

**I**n the last issue of the **Journal**, our cover article exposed major problems in the doctrinal positions of Gwen Shamblin, leader of the very popular Weigh Down Workshops.

As many of our readers are aware, this past August Gwen Shamblin went public with her views against such vital doctrines as the Trinity and salvation by grace through faith. She along with a few others recently started a church, Remnant Fellowship, which is, according to Gwen, “a division of Weigh Down Workshop.”<sup>1</sup> Our **Journal** article as well as our national discussions on Christian radio and television have sparked much interest within the Christian community and kept our phone lines busy. The most frequently asked question is whether or not Shamblin’s new religious organization—Remnant Fellowship—is a cult? Do her unorthodox views on essential Christian doctrine automatically brand her as a cult leader?

Not surprisingly, Gwen insists they do not. Says Shamblin in her own defense:

People who have questioned Trinity teachings in the past and present have sometimes been accused of being cult leaders by people whose faulty reasoning is that “cult leaders are people who explain mysteries that our finite minds cannot understand.” This is ridiculous. Explaining or revealing mysteries by the help of God is not the definition of a cult leader.<sup>2</sup>

Gwen is using a faulty definition in order to avoid culpability. Her assertion that “explaining or revealing mysteries by the help of God” does not make one a cult leader is true. However, she lumps these two things together as though they are essentially the same. *Explaining* God’s mysteries as revealed in Scripture and *revealing* God’s mysteries, are two very different things. Biblical prophets of

God, such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc., *revealed* mysteries with the help of God and wrote these revelations as Scripture. The Apostles Peter, Paul, et al, were given new revelations by God and wrote

them down as the Scriptures of the New Testament. Today the canon of Scripture is closed. All the “new light” we will ever need was revealed 2000 years ago give or take a few years. *Explaining* the Scriptures written long ago is a very different thing. Every good minister today tries to *explain* these Biblical revelations or mysteries to their flock, but none of them can claim their interpretation of these Scriptures is the one, true inspired explanation or interpretation of the Bible. The *Bible* is inspired, but the *Bible interpreter* is not.

Cult leaders, however, blur these lines to oblivion. First, they do not so much try to explain the mysteries of the Bible as to *explain them away*, all the while implying that their explanation—their Biblical *interpretation*—has been given

*to them from God*. They may or may not claim infallibility, but their comments imply it. How so? Very simply—*IF God Himself* gives you a special interpretation—it *must be infallible* or *God Himself must be fallible*. And *all* Christian-based cults claim God has revealed the meaning of Scripture to them—certainly Gwen does, very clearly.<sup>3</sup>

And though most cult leaders *claim* to be true prophets of the true God who have been commissioned by God to reveal His mysteries, they universally prove to be false prophets when they are examined by the Bible’s criteria for true prophets of God. More on this later ...

Gwen has created a “strawman argument,” which she then proceeds to bat down (at least to the satisfaction of her fervent  
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followers—those who do not have enough knowledge of cults to critically scrutinize her statements, even if they still retain enough independence of mind to question *things* she says). This setting up of a "strawman" cult definition is a common ploy used by cult leaders to hide their true nature. The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (WTBTS)\* does this all the time. Periodically, they publish a "we-are-not-a-cult" article in their *WATCHTOWER* magazine, in order to allay the fears of some of their members upon whom this truth is beginning to dawn.

Alan Gomes penned the working definition of a cult most commonly used today by Christian counter-cult organizations:

A cult of Christianity is a group of people who claim to be Christian, yet embrace a particular doctrinal system taught by an individual leader, group of leaders, or organization, which (system) denies (either explicitly or implicitly) one or more of the central doctrines of the Christian faith as taught in the 66 books of the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

There is also a sociological definition of a cult that includes such things as inordinate control over what members can think and over their lives in general. We usually look for these signs, too, when examining groups that are brought to our attention.

One rule of thumb: If a group feels the need to constantly deny they are a cult, that's generally a bad sign all by itself. ☺

Gwen has more to say about cult leaders that bears examination before we move on:

A cult leader is clearly someone who leads people to follow the commands of himself or herself, to worship the leader—not God. For instance, Jim Jones was capable of getting his followers to drink poison.<sup>5</sup>

Very few cult leaders *openly* demand "worship"—most put on quite a show of humility, in fact. If Gwen *demand*ed "worship," we would be surprised. But, while Gwen may not *ask* for "worship," she, like other cult leaders, very openly teaches that she holds a very special place in God's current plan for mankind. Such a teaching invites unholy devotion, and unholy devotion is idolatry.

Contrary to Gwen's pat suggestion, not all cults demand their adherents drink

poisoned Kool-Aid, or otherwise physically endanger themselves. Many cults are harmless in a strictly physical sense, but virtually all cults demand devotion to the leader's teachings as a condition for membership and good standing within the cult group. And virtually all cult members understand that to reject the cult's teachings and interpretations of Scripture is tantamount to a rejection of God Himself. Devotion to leader equals devotion to God. This mindset is what is used by many cult leaders to get their members to drink poison, eat garbage, refuse blood transfusions, plant poison gas bombs in subways, or engage in other life-threatening behaviors, but many others just use it to keep their membership in lockstep agreement with their *dogmas*. Gwen is definitely manifesting this mark of a cult leader. We shall have to wait and see whether she actually endangers her followers in a physical sense. Spiritually, she is already quite deadly.

Gwen has more to say about the "cult" issue:

Others are calling me a cult because Jehovah's Witnesses teach that Jesus is the Son of God and that He is not the Father. In other words, one small portion of their teachings must parallel one small portion of my teaching ... but I assure you that there are no other comparisons. This is a dangerous and faulty logic.<sup>6</sup>

Here, Gwen is correct to a point. If a "small portion" of her teachings aligned with cults or false religious movements, that would not necessarily mean she is a cult leader. Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons agree with genuine Christians that the Bible is the Word of God. Similarity of belief with well-known cults in certain areas of doctrine does not brand any group a cult by itself. Moreover, even if *none* of Gwen's teachings were similar to existing groups classified as cults, that would not mean she is *not* a cult leader. As Greg Koukl points out:

This reply, though, misses the point. Indeed, there need be no similarity to any existing cult for a new group to be in serious error. The key is not how one's teaching compares with other cults, but how it compares with biblical orthodoxy.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately though, Gwen's teachings parallel those of the Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) not in "one small portion" as she asserts, but in *many* areas of doctrine. We detailed many of these remarkable

similarities in our last **Journal** article. But, even more importantly, the *areas* (where Gwen's teachings, practices, and claims parallel JW's and other cults) are the *very areas* that distinguish orthodox Christianity from cults and false religions. False teaching on the nature of God is not some minor issue—it separates the true from the false.

How *does* one identify a group as being a cult? After all, cults claim to be "Christians," and talk about Jesus, and use (or rather misuse) the Bible, but they are counterfeits—some of them very good counterfeits. So how is the average person in the pew to know the true from the false? A large part of Midwest Christian Outreach's ministry is helping people to discern the difference between God's true pastors and the wolves that Jesus warned would appear and prey upon the sheep (Matthew 7:15). There are certain characteristics we have identified that generally apply to cults. They are a "group check," of sorts. A group does not have to match every one of these in order to set off alarm bells; if a group meets enough of these standards, you can be fairly sure it is a full-blown cult or a cult in the making. So common are these characteristics, that we have published them in a booklet which we rather ingeniously titled *Characteristics of Cults*. Let's examine some of these cultic characteristics keeping Gwen and her Remnant Fellowship in mind.

## **Characteristic #1: "The Big Cheese"**

### **Authoritarian Rule**

Upon examination, we find cults are not so much led as ruled! There is an individual or small select group whom (as they see it) God has put in control—and control they do! This may be the founder of the particular cult group, or those to whom the authority of the founder has been passed upon his death. The Branch Davidians had their David Koresh; the Heaven's Gate had Marshall Applewhite. The Jehovah's Witnesses have been ruled by a small group of elderly men known as the "Governing Body" (GB, rather than an individual as they were in their founding years). Their iron-fisted authority now *seems* to be passing to a new generation of rulers, necessitated by the advanced age of the GB, and possibly, in order to avoid lawsuits stemming from their deadly ban on blood transfusions that has needlessly taken the lives of so many.

We should not neglect to mention that the "Big Cheese" can also be, and often is, a woman—cult leading is an equal opportunity occupation! The Church Universal and Triumphant, until recently, was led by Elizabeth Claire Prophet—a.k.a. Guru Ma, a.k.a. "her doomness" (a name given her in *Time Magazine's* March 26, 1990 issue because of her penchant for predicting Armageddon).

The "Big Cheese" demands uncritical allegiance and unquestioning obedience from their followers, and to the Big Cheese alone is given the "inspired" understanding of God's Word and purposes. For example, the January 15, 1983 *WATCHTOWER*<sup>8</sup> tells its readers to "avoid independent thinking,"<sup>9</sup> likening independent thought to Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden. To question the dictates of "God's organization" is to follow Satan's invitation to "decide for yourself what is good or bad." "To this day," the article warns, "it has been Satan's subtle design to infect God's people with this type of thinking. How is such independent thinking manifested? A common way is by questioning the counsel that is provided by God's visible organization."<sup>10</sup> What a powerful tool for dictatorial rule! To question "God's organization" is to follow Satan and sin against God.

Shamblin fits this first characteristic like a glove. Although Remnant Fellowship instructs people *outside* of the group to critically evaluate *their* pastors and churches and to leave

these churches if they do not agree with Gwen's "enlightened" interpretation of Scripture, *no one* is to question Gwen, but to believe and obey *everything* she says as from the Lord. As she puts it:

The people who have less trouble with the deceitful lies that keep you overeating are the people who watched Weigh Down's Orientation Video and decided for themselves from the start that I was a leader from God, so they submitted themselves freely to the teachings on the tapes and followed EVERYTHING. They did not arrogantly pick and choose some of the teachings, but ALL of them, because they knew they were from the Lord ...<sup>11</sup>

We mustn't "pick and choose"—our job is to open up, and Gwen's job is to spoon feed us. After that, our sole responsibility is to swallow! Is Gwen a "Big Cheese?" You bet! At the beginning of the April 19, 2000 worship service of the Remnant Fellowship in Franklin, TN, an unidentified male addressed people who were new to the organization:

... God has been using Gwen to teach us through the Word what we are supposed to know and has used her to reveal so many things which may otherwise have been hidden. Gwen has been given a gift for interpretation and for teaching and for making Scriptures plain and clear that we need to know about. So as a body, we need to soak in and take in every word that is taught from her mouth.<sup>12</sup>

Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God—and Gwen?

The Big Cheeses of pseudo-Christian cults generally claim to revere the Bible, but they deny their followers the God-given right and responsibility to be Bereans<sup>13</sup>—to search the Scriptures and determine whether what they are being taught by the Cheese is true or false. Oh, they often encourage their flock to read the Bible and even "study" it, but the *proper interpretation* comes from the Cheese. If the leader says black is white, then so it is. In this way, the Bible is a dark book to the average member. Are Gwen's followers allowed to critically evaluate what she is saying by the Bible? Absolutely not! God is not going to "speak directly" to just any old body—not every one has that "gift," you see. So, just like the JW's, the Mormons, the Branch Davidians, and an unholy host of religious charlatans, a "Remnant Fellowships" needs Big Cheese guidance—in the person of Gwen—to *truly* understand the Bible:

If you think that ... your job is to stay in the Bible and all you've got to do is to ... make all your own decisions about your life ... a lot of people I think have entered Weigh Down and ... then they became better than their teacher ... They didn't have to come to the teacher. So what I felt like God has done is shake them up: "Wait a minute, I've put a teacher here on purpose. I want you to listen, and I don't want you to start bypassing this because there's [sic] other teachings that are going to come out and I'm not going to speak directly. Not each person is going to have a gift ... You need to be in under authority"<sup>14</sup>

You need to be under authority—Gwen's authority. Are we as true Christians to blindly follow our teachers? Ephesians 4:11-16 makes it abundantly clear that we are to *test* what we are being told, not to be children tossed about by crafty teachers, but mature in Christ and being led by the Holy Spirit. We are commanded by Paul to check what our teachers say by Scripture—and independent  
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thought is very necessary to this evaluation process! Our devotion is never to be to our church or our leaders, as much as we may love them and appreciate their role in our education. Our devotion is to be to God alone, and the Bible is our standard.

## **Characteristic #2: False Prophets**

### **Prophetic Speculation & False Teachings**

Biblically speaking, there is more than one defining characteristic of a false prophet. One characteristic is predicting future events that fail to come to pass. One such "miss" qualifies a group or a person as a false prophet. Deuteronomy 18:20 states:

***"But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death."***

There are two different scenarios presented here. (1) The prophet may claim to speak a message from the true God that He has not authorized or commanded the self-appointed prophet to speak, or (2) the prophet may speak in the name of other gods to draw people away from the true God. Either one of these would get the prophet stoned to death under Old Testament Law.

A very good question is presented next. In verses 21-22, God says:

***"You may say to yourselves, 'How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?' If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him."***

We're so grateful God put these words in the Bible! These verses nail such groups and persons as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons,\*\* Guru Ma of the Church Universal and Triumphant, David Koresh, Ellen G. White, Benny Hinn, and many others who have made predictions in the name of God concerning future events that failed to happen. These are easily shown to be false prophets because there is no way out for them. All you have to do is establish that they claim to be a prophet or prophetess of God, and that their prophecies (or supposed revelations) have failed.

The other characteristic of a false prophet concerns the prophet's teachings. Do they speak for the true God (the LORD, YHWH), or is the god they represent a false one?

Cults certainly do not represent the God of the Bible but one of their own making. The JW deity is a limited god who does not know the future (lacks omniscience, cf. Psalm 147:5), cannot be everywhere at one time (is not omnipresent, cf. Psalm 139:7-18), and because of these two deficiencies, is certainly not the all-powerful (or omnipotent, cf. Isaiah: 40:67) God of the Bible. The Mormon god has these same problems, and moreover, there is not one God, in their view, but millions; and men also can become gods over their own little planets if they try hard enough. Heaven's Gate leader Marshall Applewhite's god was a space alien. *All* the cults have the wrong god one way or another. Gwen's god is so small that he actually fears human beings could harm or kill him! Gwen also teaches that the Father and Son are two separate beings, rather than two persons in one being (nature); and the Holy Spirit is a "good attitude."<sup>16</sup>

So, in light of the fact that Gwen represents a false god, does she, like the JWs, Mormons, etc., claim to be a prophet of the LORD God? Yes, she does! Does she claim to speak God's words and messages to His people? Yes, she does.

Jeremiah, Amos, Zephaniah, and Micah all had ...<sup>17</sup>

If anyone calls oneself a prophet of God and makes false predictions or teaches a false god, he or she is a false prophet. God's people are to test those who claim to be prophets by *both* of these criteria. If he or she makes predictions for the future that fail to come to pass, that alone will convict them. If they *never* make false prophecies regarding the future, but teach a false view of God, that alone convicts them. Many cults are false prophets on *both* counts.

Jesus warned His followers at Matthew 7:15 that false prophets would come to them in sheep's clothing. That is, they would look like true Christians but their fruit would expose them! False prophecies and false teachings are the fruit of these prophets. Jesus did not indicate that there was some prophet "wannabe" middle ground, whereby false prophets might be excused if they were well meaning or admitted their mistakes. After giving them a Biblical evaluation, we are to give 'em a "T" or give 'em an "F."

## **Characteristic #3: We're the Bad Guys**

### **Attack the Christian Church**

Cults hold differing beliefs but are absolutely united in their contempt and hatred of ... guess who? Us—the Christian Church! We are the common enemy, the root of all the world's ills, hypocrites, warmongers, immoral. The Church is responsible for racism, sexism, imperialism, exploitation of resources, and acne. Well, maybe not acne, but if they could pin acne on us, they would.

The WTBS is up front about the contempt they hold for "Christendom." They vigorously attack Christian clergy and institutions in almost every issue of *WATCHTOWER* magazine. The Christian church is the infamous "whore of Babylon" which will soon be destroyed by God in the Battle of Armageddon, which is (as ever) right around the corner.

The Mormons show a somewhat friendlier face toward the Christian church than the WTBS does, preferring in modern times to be accepted as "just another denomination" to ease their proselytization efforts within the churches. Yet they (falsely) believe just as strongly as the WTBS that they are "restoring" the true Christianity that was "lost" in the early centuries after the death of the Apostles. Past "prophets" of the Mormon religious organization were less concerned about acceptance, and consequently, were clear about their identification of the Christian churches. Collectively, the churches made up ... you guessed it ... the same old "whore of Babylon." Former Mormon prophet Orson Pratt wrote in *The Seer*:

Both Catholics and Protestants are nothing less than the "whore of Babylon" whom the Lord denounces by the mouth of John the Revelator as having corrupted all the earth by their fornication and wickedness. And any person who shall be so wicked as to receive the holy ordinance of the gospel from the ministers of any of these apostate churches will be sent down to hell with them unless they repent of the unholy and impious act.<sup>18</sup>

And of course, Gwen Shamblin has "weighed in" on the evil Church—the same evil Church that invited her in (most of the 30,000 *WDW* groups were held in churches) and gave her millions of dollars. (Over a million people have attended at \$103.00 for first-time participants. Add it up!) Like the JWs and Mormons, and a whole host of other cults, Gwen identifies the "whore of Babylon"—the woman who rides the beast in Revelation—as none other than the "counterfeit church." "Christendom"—you and me—us. Oh, what a surprise ... ☹

This is the beast—people that are meeting together that are anti-authority. Chapter 18 [of Revelation] tells us to flee the ‘Babylon Church.’ ‘Come out of her, my people, so you will not share in her sins.’ Get out quick because God is going to destroy those that are rebellious.<sup>19</sup>

Tell me why inside the church are they not wanting to get it all right and bow down? Because the great delusion infiltrated many decades go ... Truly the counterfeit church has taken over and sin is rampant and the wall is broken down.<sup>20</sup>

According to Gwen, Martin Luther and the reformation are largely to blame for the alleged mess we find ourselves in. She believes Luther concocted the concept of “grace” in order to excuse his sinful lifestyle, and introduced a false gospel into the Church at that time:

A theologian that studied law went into the monastery; he came up with a lot of the theology that we have today for grace that I don’t see in the Bible.<sup>21</sup> ... This is a massive century long and centuries old lie ... that theologian had to come up with another gospel.<sup>22</sup>

This is just a small sampling of Shamblin’s hateful rants against the Church. She also holds Christian pastors in contempt. So arrogant (delusional?) has she become that Shamblin actually believes God is beginning to destroy those Christian leaders who oppose her message:

So I’m gonna tell you what’s going on right now. Another thing that went on when Amy and I were on book tour and we kept hearing ... ‘Our preacher had brain cancer.’ ... It was like three in a row where they lost their preacher or the preacher quit or ... they were fired or whatever. God is getting rid of the head and the tail. What does that leave? It leaves the Body. It leaves the Body of God, and He’s doing a new thing. So you’re gonna be witnessing all of this, the heads and the tails cut off—the preachers and the elders.<sup>23</sup>

We are not saying the Church is above criticism—not at all. It is the hatred and venom of the cults that set them apart in this regard, and their wholesale trashing of the leaders of the Church. Any Christian pastor or teacher that faithfully teaches the Gospel of the Grace of God will have a target painted on their chests by the cults. We believe it should be seen and worn as a badge of honor.

#### **Characteristic #4: Christian Doctrine is Unreasonable**

##### **A Religion That “Makes Sense”**

Cults heap contempt on the doctrines of the Christian faith, especially the Trinity and the Deity of Christ. Many go so far as to imagine they are the true Christians *because* they oppose these (and other) doctrines. This is highly illogical in view of the fact that such anti-Trinitarian views are held by a myriad of cult groups in the world today. It’s funny they all seem to think they are the only ones who have discovered the “truth” about the churches and Church doctrine.

When people who are exiting a cult group are asked why they joined the group in the first place, they will very often reply that the teachings of the group all fit together like a hand in a glove. The teachings seemed very logical. Guru Ma of the Church Universal and Triumphant says her message “attracts” people because she “put it all together” for them. In a similar vein, the Chicago New Church, an older cult founded by Emmanuel Swedenborg, advertises itself as “A religion that makes sense.”<sup>24</sup>

The WTBTS calls the Trinity a “confusing” doctrine, contrary to

normal reason, unlike anything in their experience. Gwen Shamblin agrees with them. When we spoke with Shamblin by phone, she stated that Christian Church leaders (who she referred to as “false prophets and false teachers”) use the “false teaching” of the Trinity doctrine to keep the flock in a state of confusion.

One pleasant aspect of being a cult leader is making up a god that “makes sense” and confuses no one. Of course, such a god would have to be very small and uncomplicated; eternality, omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence would have to go, which is exactly why the cults throw out those confusing “inconveniences” along with God’s tri-personal nature. But if reason is our sole guide—is it reasonable to insist that the Creator of the Universe must, of necessity, be like anything within man’s experience—fully understandable and explainable by our finite minds? Of course not, God is a different life form. ☺

Cultic doctrines are born of Bible “difficulties”—things taught in the Bible that are beyond the capacity of human yardsticks or scales to measure and weigh. One stumbling block to understanding the full Deity of Christ is the fact the Father generated the Son, and yet, Father and Son are co-eternal. There was never a time when the Son did not exist. Is that impossible, or just beyond our finite understanding? It’s funny we are perfectly willing to accept that fire possesses properties unlike the properties of human nature, even though the average person has no idea of how it “works.”

Here’s an experiment you can try at home. You’ll need two candles—one to represent the Father and one the Son. You can add a third to represent the Holy Spirit if you like. Ignore the candles, it is the flames we are examining. The candles are just the holders. Light the first, and then see how the original flame can generate another upon the other candle. One flame so easily becomes two, yet the first is not diminished. Also, the fire making up the original flame is no “older” than the fire on the generated one. *They are the same exact age.* Now put the flames together again. Impossible! How can the two be one? Yet we all believe it—we do not insist that fire *cannot exist as it does*—that it must fit within the framework of what is possible for human beings. Fire does not possess human nature, and that explains why it acts more like fire than like a man! By the same token, we do not have the luxury of making up a god that must operate within the bounds of our limited nature. We are finite—God is infinite. Just as a finite human parent begets a finite human child, an infinite Eternal Father begets an infinite Eternal Son. The true God does not possess the nature of man and so does not have to conform to our “way of being.” We must just accept God as he has revealed Himself in the Bible.

The Bible teaches there is only *one* God yet, without flinching, asserts there are three divine persons within that Godhead. What to do, what to do? JW’s choose the Old Testament “oneness” as their banner, and shrink their Jesus to the status of mere manhood. The Mormons recognize that all three persons are referred to as God, so they throw monotheism out and make their god one in a million. Rather than make the mistake of lowering Jesus to the status of mere manhood, they raise mankind to the status of godhood. Gwen subscribes to a view somewhere between these two. To Gwen, the Father is the main God—the big one, with the Son having come into existence at a point in time. Jesus is a secondary little god, but he is “way up there”—closer to God than man.

All of these various cultic options falsely shorten the distance between manhood and godhood so that it seems man may, by his own efforts, jump across and earn God’s acceptance. Yet the Bible

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teaches the distance is so great that it can be bridged by God alone through the incarnation (taking on of human flesh) and mediation of Jesus Christ and *never* by man's efforts or reshaping of reality.

### **Characteristic #5: Twisting the Scriptures** **Making Black, White**

Sometimes, in order to "fix" those unreasonable Christian doctrines that have been around for centuries, it has been necessary for cults to twist a Scripture or two to fit their enlightened understanding of what the Bible actually means. How can cult groups "rescue" the Scriptures from their obvious (but misguided) meaning? A text without a context is a pretext, so the saying goes. A pretext is something, which sounds true but is, in reality, false. When you are in a cult, you are in "pretext heaven." A hallmark of a cult is to make the false ring true.

How do they accomplish this? First, they employ what is called "proof texting," or stringing a bunch of unrelated verses together to make their case. Another "Scripture twister" is to ignore the historical grammatical context of a given passage. What does that mean? In any legitimate Bible exegesis, we want to understand exactly what the author of the passage meant to convey. We need to know the history and the culture of the writer in order to discern what the meaning of a particular word or phrase was at the time and in that culture. For example, in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century culture, the word "gay" meant something entirely different than it did in the "Gay 90's" of the 1800's. If we were to read something authored during that older time period, we would not be honest if we attempted to read the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century understanding of the word into the 19<sup>th</sup> Century setting. The word "firstborn" was, in New Testament times, a title meaning "the preeminent one"—the one with the right to rule. Yet, the WTBS twist on this passage is that Paul was calling Jesus a *created* being by calling Him the "firstborn of all creation" at Col. 1:15. Gwen Shamblin holds a very similar view as she writes:

For example, if the Greek scholars translated the words "Jesus is the firstborn over all creation," you can count on the Greek meaning being "born first."<sup>25</sup>

The passage is actually saying the opposite in its context; that Jesus is the Creator of all things, and so has the right to rule over all creation. In addition to this historical understanding, legitimate Bible exegesis demands a knowledge and honest use of the rules of grammar that would be employed to understand any literary work.

Gwen claims to respect the Word of God, (and Greek scholars) and to buttress her argument about Col. 1:15, she condemns those who she (wrongly) claims are changing or adding to it:

Someone might claim to you and boast to you that they are a better Greek scholar than all the hundreds of the prestigious Greek scholars of our day who accurately translated the Greek word into the English word, "firstborn," in the New International Version. These people may boast that they know better, but please be careful of people who add to or take away from the Bible.<sup>26</sup>

This is another "strawman argument," of course. We have no quarrel with scholars concerning their *use* of the word "firstborn." We quarrel with her *misunderstanding* that the word "firstborn," in this context, has anything to do with birth order.

But for all Gwen's supposed respect for "Greek scholars," she blithely disrespects the scholarship that has brought us the Bible translations we presently possess. She cheerfully adds to the Bible whatever words she needs to make it say what she wants it to say. For example, like other anti-Trinitarians, she has a problem of what

to do with the Holy Spirit, whom the Bible shows to be both a person and Almighty God (Acts 5:3-4)! Oh, what to do, what to do? Here's what Gwen does. During the April 19, 2000 Remnant Fellowship service, she actually instructed her followers to write in their Bibles "good attitude" under the word "*Spirit*." Voila! No more problem! The Holy Spirit is no longer a person, but a feeling!

What does Gwen do with Galatians, written to expose false brethren such as herself? It is quite interesting actually. First, she admits to her followers that a plain reading of the text makes her teachings sound "completely off-base," and presents a fairly accurate picture of what Galatians actually says, although, of course, she doesn't *BELIEVE* it and neither should they!

I'm going to read chapter 2, verse 15, through chapter 3, verse 14, and it's gonna sound like we are completely off-base in this group. What it's gonna sound like is that you crazy people started with the Spirit and now you are trying to do a work to be justified in God and to get to heaven.<sup>27</sup> ... If we are trying to do it by the law now, have we separated ourselves from Christ? A strong argument unless you know the truth.<sup>28</sup> ... This grace [in Galatians] sounds like you don't have to do anything.<sup>29</sup>

Gwen teaches that one's justification depends upon law-keeping and she very plainly sees that here in Galatians the Apostle Paul presents a "strong argument" *against this very thing*! Moreover, this pesky text suggests that to try to gain salvation by law-keeping separates one from Christ! Oh, no! It *sounds like* you don't have to do anything to be saved! And, of course, it *sounds like that* because it *is like that*! Just like that! But, plain as it is, Gwen doesn't *BELIEVE* it and neither should her hapless followers. No, in her little world, it is only "a strong argument unless you know the truth;" and *THE* truth is Gwen's truth. Shades of Groucho Marx ... Who are you gonna believe—me or your own eyes? Sadly, cult members are expected to deny "their own eyes" and "see" only what they are told to see.

This next excerpt is the most interesting of all. Gwen tells the folks she is going to have to "read it [the text] *quickly*" so that it will not disturb them with the news that "there is nothing we can do" to earn salvation!

I'm gonna go ahead and read chapter 2, verse 15, through chapter 3, verse 14. I'm gonna read it quickly because I'm reading it and you're gonna be hearing it from the voice of the other side. It's gonna sound like there is nothing we can do, we just need to quit trying this human effort stuff.<sup>30</sup>

Does fast reading change the meaning? We can only surmise it is that old "cookie rule" at work—eat them fast enough, and the calories don't count! What if we were to read the Bible standing over the kitchen sink or on the run? Will that likewise change the meaning?

Next, Gwen says how confusing it all is, *sounding as it does* like "we're justified by this faith" and that law-keeping is a "yoke of slavery."

So now we are thoroughly confused, and it looks like goodness gracious we're justified by this faith and we need to just not burden anybody with a yoke of slavery.<sup>31</sup>

Goodness gracious, indeed! Here is a Scripture hint: When you have to read Scripture really fast to avoid hearing what the passage actually says, you should probably examine *YOUR BELIEFS* instead! Friends, don't let *Gwen's* thorough confusion



become *your* problem. Remember Paul's warning from Galatians chapter 1, verses 6-8. It is so apropos to the situation here:

***I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of God and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel to you other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!***<sup>32</sup>

Throwing people into confusion is the forte of the cults. If you are asked to choose between some Johnny-come-lately, self-appointed prophet or the Apostle Paul, whom are you going to choose? Listen to Paul, and do not allow yourselves to become enslaved to Gwen's (or anyone else's) perversion of the plain teaching of Scripture (Galatians 4:9).

## **Characteristic #6: "Look At Our Works!!!"**

### **Salvation By Our Own Efforts**

Most pseudo-Christian cults talk about Jesus, acknowledge His life and death, and manage to squeeze Him into their salvation process somewhere. But rather than accepting what Jesus did on our behalf is *alone* sufficient to save anyone, cults and false religions offer their adherents the "Jesus-plus plan." Yes, Jesus is part of the picture, but what Jesus accomplished on Calvary only gives folks *in association with the proper group*, the *opportunity to save themselves* through whatever works the group deems as necessary to perform salvation.

Let's look at the Christian "formula" for salvation and compare it with the cult "formula."

Christian View ..... Faith = Salvation + Works  
Cult View ..... Faith + Works = Salvation

### **The 70-Year Job Interview**

Gwen Shamblin likens this life to a "70-year job interview." You and I must live our lives in such a way as to earn a position in God's company. He is the CEO. He puts you through rigorous tests to see if you are a person whom He—as the "boss"—can trust. Life gets difficult when God, your potential employer, throws problems at you to see how well you can handle authority. Will you obediently submit to your boss ... and like it? It is not enough to obey—you have to enjoy it, and you better be really careful not to forget anything. This is not a job interview you want to flub—Heaven or Hell awaits you depending upon the impression you make!

You are in a job interview. How can He test you if everyday is sunshiney [sic]? How does He test you to see if you can submit under authority and like your authority?<sup>33</sup> ... And for us to get hired into this kingdom, to go through this job interview process down here on this 70 years, we ought to be doing everything we can and filling out our application forms making sure we haven't forgotten anything.<sup>34</sup>

It is very important we show ourselves to be meek and humble, so God won't have to worry about a hostile takeover!

He gives salvation to the humble. Why? In other words, they get to be in His business, they get to be hired on to be there for life because He can trust them after 70 years ... your anger, anything, all will be under His control and He has no fear that you're gonna like, jump out at Him like that spider or try to take over. After the experience with Satan, He couldn't take that anymore. So that's why we're under this experiment in a 70-year job interview to see who will be humble.<sup>35</sup>

Poor God—He just "couldn't take" another experience like He had with Satan. Therefore, He can only allow such people around Him who He knows will not hurt or kill Him. That's why God allows tough situations to arise in your life—not for your spiritual growth but for His protection! If you buy Gwen's viewpoint, you better make sure your résumé is up to date, and you have the proper credentials to sell yourself and get the job. This is the God Gwen sees in the Scriptures? This graceless, fearful "potential boss?" She must be reading the Bible *really, really* fast!

... God knows when you get to heaven, if you haven't had a tough situation you're gonna make the same judgement on Him. They did it to Jesus. If they'll kill Jesus, they'll kill God when they get to heaven. Satan tried to do that many centuries ago.<sup>36</sup>

What a pathetic god Gwen represents—certainly not the Almighty God of the Bible!

### **Judge Me By My Success**

Worldly measures of achievement (financial success, membership growth rates, etc.) do not imply God's blessing, yet cults point people to such "successes" to prove God is behind them. Gwen is no different. Just like these other groups, Gwen points us to her success and popularity to prove to us God has appointed her to speak for Him—that she is God's true prophet for our time.

Here Gwen twists Jesus' statement that good fruit cannot be harvested from a bad tree. We are supposed to acknowledge she is a "good tree" because of the thousands of people who have allegedly bought into her "total Lordship" teaching and, as a result, have improved their lives.

If I were a bad tree, you would not be hearing from the thousands who have given themselves over to total Lordship to God Almighty through Jesus Christ and proven it by turning away from any stronghold through my teachings and God's Word.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, Gwen offers no evidence to support her claim that her followers "have given themselves over to total Lordship to God"—how would anyone even *know* that about someone else? Can Gwen see into their souls? But, of course, all cult groups make this same claim. Countless families have been "saved" or greatly strengthened by their association with Mormonism. The WTBS continually brags of how many millions of people worldwide have had their lives improved by coming under their bondage ... er ... "tutelage." But, of course, even a quick glance at Jesus' words in Matthew 7:15-23 shows that Jesus was not talking about examining Christian works, but examining the "*fruit*" of alleged "*prophets*" to discern whether they were true or false. "***Beware of false prophets! They will come to you in sheep's clothing***" looking for all the world like true Christians, but their *teachings* will be false when examined by the Scriptures. False prophets will always produce false teachings, regardless of their *appearance* of spirituality. Good works are no yardstick of true Christianity.

We use what we call our "apple tree" illustration to explain the difference between true Christian Soteriology (Doctrine of Salvation) and the cult view and practice. Yes, we used this illustration in the last **Journal**, but it fits here, so bear with us. If we tell you that an apple tree represents a Christian, with apples representing good Christian works, how would you say those apples were produced? *They naturally flow from the very nature of the tree!* No apple tree frets and worries (or toils or spins, to quote the Master) about producing apples, do they? Nor are the apples produced out of an act of the apple tree's will. We understand that,

(Continued on next page)

although the fruit comes forth *from* the apple tree, they are really *produced* by God, right?

Now, if we were to show you an evergreen tree with apples tied or glued onto it, would such affixed apples make that evergreen tree an apple tree? Could the fruit change the nature of the tree? No! We could admire the apples, perhaps, or even pluck one off and eat it, but let's face it; evergreen trees are not going to gain eternal life! Only apple trees are granted that privilege.

For our illustration, we could say that all of us are evergreen trees until we put our faith in the finished work of Christ and accept the free gift of eternal life. At that moment, God changes our nature (Gal. 2:20); turns us into an apple tree. There is no going back. We can cooperate with the gardener by submitting to His pruning, growing in the direction He wants us to, and produce fruit; or we can "grow willfully wild" and produce little fruit, but all apple trees will produce some fruit.

Just the same, a Christian produces good works from their nature. The new nature is one of love, and love will always produce good works!

The cultists are pasting good works on themselves, but they cannot change their nature. Cult members and nominal churchgoers are hoping to be judged by the apples they have pasted on themselves.

Can we always tell a tree by its apples? What if we were to find a genuine apple tree with no apples on it? Would we then label that tree an evergreen? That would be silly, because an apple tree, with or without fruit, is *not* an evergreen tree. No, we know that in nature, there are sometimes good reasons why a tree might not be bearing fruit. It may be out of season, or perhaps, it is merely immature. Or it may have suffered an injury from a particularly bad winter, a late frost, or a crippling storm. By the same token, we all know of someone who claims to be a Christian, and yet, our inspection doesn't turn up evidential apples. Does this mean the fruitless one is not a Christian? Perhaps. But sometimes we need to be patient. Then the miracle happens. The tree matures, blossoms, and then — APPLES!

Okay, here's a test—two trees come to your door—what are you going to look for? Not apples (good works)—pinecones (false teachings)!!! They may be clean cut and look just like Christians, and even carry Bibles, but all that can easily be "pasted" on. However, if you ask them who Jesus is and they say "Michael the Archangel" (as with the JWs), or "the spirit brother of Lucifer" (as with the Mormons), or "one of the seven incarnations of the Avatar" (as in Hinduism), or the one who came to offer us a "70-year job interview" (in Shamblin's case)—these are the telltale PINECONES!

How does a person become an apple tree anyway? John 1:12-13. As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become apple trees, to those who believe on His name (paraphrased). Note in verse 13 that such a transformation is not by natural birth (there are no "born" apple trees except Jesus), not by the will of the evergreen (apple pasting), nor by the will of other men (no salvation by association). The offer of accepting Christ's ransom by faith to receive full pardon from our sins is open to ALL men, but we must BELIEVE it.

***To the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness*** (Romans 4:5).

The cults say, "That is too easy." To that we answer—you have to argue with the Bible, not with us. But we don't think it is all that easy either. Is it easy to swallow your pride and believe there is

nothing you can do to contribute to your own salvation—that you are powerless to save yourself? If the Gospel is so easy to believe, why are so many out there—like Gwen and her followers—trying to save themselves?

## **Characteristic #7: Don't Tell Me You're Saved!!!**

### **No Assurance of Eternal Life**

What is one problem you can envision with the "Faith + Works" formula of achieving acceptance before God? Exactly! Who decides what works God requires? All cult groups have *their own* version of "the works necessary for salvation."

Another problem with earning salvation is how will anyone know if they have done enough? When it comes to the cults, there is no "enough." EVER. Insecurity is a driving force behind the zeal of the cults.

What does such a lack of assurance lead to? A conscientious person will find himself in terrible bondage to guilt and fear because, as he looks at himself honestly, he *knows* he is not righteous in his own right and cannot live up to God's standards. A person who is less honest with himself will tend to become very self-righteous and will categorize sins as big and little sins, with the *big* ones being the ones he never or rarely engages in. I have been asked countless times by the meticulous categorizers, "You mean somebody could just go out and commit *murder* and still be saved?" Notice they do *not* say, "You mean somebody could go out and tell a little white lie or a little harmless gossip and still be saved?" The fact is folks; King David *did* commit murder. And as for those "little sins," didn't Jesus liken anger to murder in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:21-22)?

We do not have to be in bondage to guilt and fear, because Romans 8:1 says, "***there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.***" A cultist has no concept of what it means to be in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit baptizes us into His body (1 Cor. 12:13). Can we be amputated out?

Understanding the Christian's parent/child relationship to God is the key. Parents—ask yourself—what kind of disappointment would cause you to forsake your child? Who loved Jeffrey Dahmer and mourned his death? His parents. What about Susan Smith, the woman all America loves to hate for drowning her young sons? Although Susan is a gross exception that proves the rule, Linda Russell (Susan's mother) was quoted in *People Magazine* as saying, "I'm Susan's mom, I love her." If love is conditional, it's not parental love.

Indeed, would we consider a good human parent to be one who only loved their child until they were disappointed in them or let down? What would it do to their relationship if the child knew he was loved conditionally and could be deserted at any time? Does a child who is insecure in his father's love act better than a child who knows they are loved unconditionally? Of course not, the opposite is true.

What kind of person does a child whom has only known conditional love become? He becomes a conditional lover himself, since that is the only type of love he has known. To me, this concept is very helpful in understanding the "shunning" practiced by cult groups upon adherents who fall out of favor with the group, or people who have made themselves "the enemy" by coming out in opposition to the cult group. People who find themselves in a position of having to continually "earn God's favor" cannot feel genuine love for God; only servitude. And they, in turn, know nothing of loving people who do not meet their standards.

Salvation is a gift, a free gift with no strings attached (Eph.



2:8-9). We gain entrance into the family of God and eternal life purely on the basis of God's grace—His undeserved kindness.


So what place do "works" have in the whole scheme of things? The Bible talks an awful lot about Christian works. Jesus told His followers to **"store up treasures in Heaven"** (Matt. 6:20). The fruit of our labor here on Earth is heavenly "treasure." And salvation is always and only by grace, rewards are by works (1 Cor. 3:10-15). The hapless cult member is kept in the dark about this reality, and for good reason. If the cultist actually believed salvation was a free gift of God without strings attached, his devotion would be directed toward his gracious benefactor instead of toward the "Big Cheese." That will never do! Another "sad" result of salvation purely by the grace of God would be no room for boasting on the part of the group's adherents. And the "Big Cheese" fears (and rightly so) that without the heavy use of guilt and fear, they would not be able to demand and get total obedience to every twist of doctrine to come down the pike.

### **Our Conclusion**

In our opinion, Gwen Shamblin is a cult leader and Remnant Fellowship is a new cult in the making. We know some people will be offended by this label, and feel it is "mean" to refer to Gwen this way. After all, she seems so sincere. But you will have to read the Scriptures at super-sonic speed to find any sympathy in there for false prophets and false teachers—as Gwen most assuredly is. We do believe it is quite possible she is "sincere." Many false prophets are. Do the leaders of the Jehovah's Witnesses sincerely believe they are chosen by God to bring "the truth" to the world? We think so. Mormon leader Gordon Hinkley appeared on *Larry King Live* last year. He seemed *very sincere* to us. Biblically though, "sincerity" is not offered as a mitigating circumstance. What God condemns, we need not defend.<sup>38</sup>

But if anyone is uncomfortable calling Gwen's Remnant Fellowship a cult, they may, by all means, avoid the word and refer to it as a pseudo-Christian religious movement or a new false-prophet organization. The label is not important. What matters is that she is a genuine false prophet, teaching false doctrines to her flock, and attempting to spread these falsehoods far and wide in the Church.

Don was interviewed on the *700 Club* back in October, and the program was aired in December after the election fracas. Gwen was interviewed on the program as well. Her parting comment was that she hopes the "Christian world" would not "shut her mouth" until she has accomplished her mission. Her goal is to "warn the church" of the consequences of what she sees as their apostasy and "counterfeit" status. She means to draw off as many disciples after herself from the pews as she can and then—the pastors and elders of the "Christian world" will be either killed or otherwise eliminated by God, leaving her in charge. It is sad to us that she is so deluded. Even sadder is the fact she has convinced a number of folks to follow her into this folly.

The Churches' job is not to "shut her mouth," but to **"contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints"** (Jude 3), and to attempt to rescue those who have fallen captive to false teachers (Col. 2:8, 2 Pet. 2:1-9). The thing to keep in mind is that *anyone* can be deceived by a good counterfeit like Gwen Shamblin, like the JW's, like the Mormons, etc. Christian love asks us to respond by seeking out the ones who have been led astray and lead them back to the fold, whether they're in your church or at your door. 

\*Watchtower Bible & Tract Society (WTBTS) is the government or clergy of the Jehovah's Witnesses (JW's).

\*\*Mormons a.k.a. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Remnant Basics*, Remnant Fellowship, Franklin, TN, 2000 tape 1 (Weigh Down Workshop will here after be WDW).

<sup>2</sup> *Statement Regarding the Teaching of the Trinity – Expanded 9/15/2000*, p3.

<sup>3</sup> Weigh Down Workshop archived e-mail #29.

<sup>4</sup> *Unmasking Modern Cults*, Alan Gomes, Zondervan, 1995, p7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Statement Regarding the Teaching of the Trinity – Expanded 9/15/2000*, p3.

<sup>7</sup> *The Birth of a Cult?*, Greg Koukl, November/December, [www.str.org/free/solid\\_ground/SG0011.htm](http://www.str.org/free/solid_ground/SG0011.htm), p2.

<sup>8</sup> *The WATCHTOWER* is one of the bi-weekly publications of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society a.k.a. Jehovah's Witnesses.

<sup>9</sup> *The WATCHTOWER*, January 15, 1983, p22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> WDW archived e-mail #29.

<sup>12</sup> Audio tape of the Remnant Fellowship service of 4/19/00. Tape on file.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 17:11.

<sup>14</sup> Audio tape of the Remnant Fellowship service of 4/9/00. Tape on file.

<sup>15</sup> *Statement Regarding the Teaching of the Trinity – Expanded 9/15/2000*, p5&6.

<sup>16</sup> Audio tape of the Remnant Fellowship service of 4/19/00. Tape on file.

<sup>17</sup> WDW archived e-mail #22.

<sup>18</sup> *The Seer*, Orson Pratt, p225.

<sup>19</sup> *Remnant Basics* Audio tape 1, Remnant Fellowship, Franklin, TN, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Remnant Fellowship Worship Service, 3/19/00.

<sup>21</sup> *State of the Church*, February 1999; Weigh Down Workshop, Franklin, TN.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Remnant Fellowship Worship Service, 2/27/00.

<sup>24</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 12, 1993, Tempo Section.

<sup>25</sup> *Statement Regarding the Teaching of the Trinity – Expanded 9/15/2000*, p4.

<sup>26</sup> *Statement Regarding the Teaching of the Trinity – Expanded 9/15/2000*, p9.

<sup>27</sup> Remnant Fellowship Worship Service, 4/19/00.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Remnant Fellowship Worship Service, 3/5/00. Commenting on Galatians 5:1-5 and how confusing the book of Galatians is.

<sup>32</sup> NIV.

<sup>33</sup> WDW staff devotions, audio tape on file (no date).

<sup>34</sup> Remnant Fellowship Worship Service, 2/27/00.

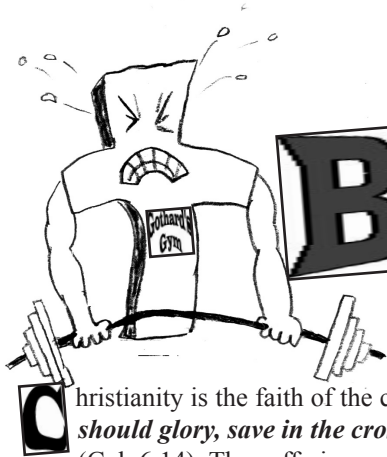
<sup>35</sup> WDW staff devotions, audio tape on file (no date).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Statement Regarding the Teaching of the Trinity – Expanded 9/15/2000*, p2.

<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, our thinking is that if you are going to call the Christian Church "the whore of Babylon," "the beast," "counterfeit," etc., and consign all of her pastors and elders to the trash heap, you cannot be thin skinned when pointed criticism comes your way.





# Bill Gothard's Powerless Gospel

by Dr. Harry Ad-

**C**hristianity is the faith of the cross. *"But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Gal. 6:14). The sufferings of Christ obtained for us what we could never obtain by ourselves with respect to salvation and sanctification. Therefore, the Apostles' writings abound with references to the cross, the tree, the blood, and the sacrificial Lamb. They portray Christ crucified (Gal. 3:2), as the One who delivered Himself for our sins (Rom. 4:25), who gave Himself as our ransom (Mark 10:45), who humbled Himself to the point of death on the cross (Phil. 2:8), and who will be worshipped forever as the Lamb that purchased us by His blood (Rev. 5:8-9). The benefits of the cross are manifold including (but not limited to):

- Peace with God (Col. 1:20);
- The present intercession of Christ because He has entered Heaven with the blood of His suffering (Hebrews 7:25, 9:11-26);
- Citizenship in Heaven (Phil 3:18-20);
- Deliverance from the power of sin (Rom. 6:1-11);
- Motivation for godly living (2 Cor. 5:15);
- Crucifixion of the world to us, and us to the world (Gal. 6:14);
- Victory over Satan (Rev. 12:11).

Clearly, the message of the cross is the power by which God transforms men. Pioneer missionary to the Moslems, Samuel M. Zwemer, testified to its power saying:

If the Cross of Christ is anything to the mind, it is surely everything—the most profound reality and the sublimest mystery. One comes to realize that literally all the wealth and glory of the gospel centers here ... The more unbelievers deny its crucial character, the more do believers find in it the key to the mysteries of sin and suffering. We rediscover the apostolic emphasis on the Cross when we read the gospel with Moslems. We find that, although the offense of the Cross remains, its magnetic power is irresistible.<sup>1</sup>

Zwemer's experience with Moslems bears witness to the truth proclaimed by Paul: *"For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God"* (1 Cor. 1:17-18 NIV). Never do the Apostles let us forget the power of the cross.

But Bill Gothard does. The third chapter of his new book, *The Sevenfold Power of First Century Churches and Homes*, is concerned with the life-changing message preached by the Apostles. In it he attempts to explain why the Apostles' teaching was so powerful. In the preface to the chapter, Gothard asks:

What teaching could be so powerful that it commanded the "steadfast" commitment of all the believers? What training could be so effective that it equipped believers to be powerful witnesses of their faith and to be joyful

in the face of temptations, trials, and persecutions? ... All who heard these teaching were astonished and the lives of those who followed them were transformed."<sup>2</sup>

With this introduction, one would expect the chapter to present the apostolic preaching of the cross, but that is not the case. Gothard omits any reference to the cross. No mention is made of the sufferings of Christ, or of His shed blood.<sup>3</sup> Instead, he argues the power that changed lives was a character message based upon the Sermon on the Mount. His thought is traced in the following statements:

The phrase "the apostles' doctrine" is used only once in the New Testament. It defines the teaching that the apostles gave to the multitudes of new believers after the Day of Pentecost. ... It is obvious that the teaching which the apostles gave came from the three years of training they had just received from the Lord Jesus Christ ... What then was the basic content of the teachings of Jesus, also referred to in Scripture as the doctrine of Christ? "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son." The teachings of Jesus are clearly stated in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).<sup>4</sup>

Gothard thereafter gives his interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount.

Another curious feature of this chapter is the equal silence on the role of grace in transforming lives. Gothard's sole reference to grace is when he says, "Paul combined the teachings of the grace of God with the message of the kingdom of God ..."<sup>5</sup> Did the Gospel of grace originate with Paul as Gothard here suggests? And does grace not play a vital role in sanctification as indicated in Titus 2:11-12 (NIV): *"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. {12} It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age ..."* Again, there seems to be a terrible omission from Gothard's presentation of the Apostles' teaching.

Any presentation of the Christian message that ignores the cross and minimizes grace is a serious matter indeed. Paul warned the Philippians about those who, while posing as Christian teachers, directed attention away from the cross: *"For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ"* (Phil. 3:18).

So, was the substance of the apostolic message essentially a reiteration of the Sermon on the Mount as Gothard contends? And was the message of grace something added by Paul as Gothard suggests? After answering these questions, it will be possible to offer conclusions about Mr. Gothard's presentation of the apostolic teaching.

## The Apostles' Teaching

In attempting to prove the Apostles' teaching was based on the Sermon on the Mount, Gothard equates the biblical phrases

*“the Apostles’ doctrine”* and *“the doctrine of Christ”* with it.<sup>6</sup> He then asks, “What were the major themes of the doctrine of Christ that had such authority and power over those that heard them?”<sup>7</sup> In the balance of the chapter, he argues that these themes were “The Message of the Kingdom” and “The Message of Character” as found in the Sermon on the Mount. Discussing the kingdom, he states that Paul combined the message of grace with the message of the kingdom, and continued to preach the kingdom up to the end of his life.<sup>8</sup>

Does Gothard establish that the biblical references to “the Apostles’ doctrine” and “the doctrine of Christ” are equivalent to the Sermon on the Mount? No, he does not. The phrase *“the Apostles’ doctrine”* occurs in Acts 2:42: *“And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”* To determine more precisely what this phrase *“the Apostles’ doctrine”* meant, it is necessary to examine the teaching of the Apostles in the Book of Acts. New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger summarizes the apostolic teaching in Acts this way:

By comparing the reports of the sermons preached by Peter and Paul and other leaders of the early church, scholars have ascertained the common core present in all of them. The following points were emphasized:

- (1) The promises of God made in Old Testament days have now been fulfilled, and the Messiah has come:
- (2) He is Jesus of Nazareth, who
  - (a) Went about doing good and executing mighty works by the power of God;
  - (b) Was crucified according to the purpose of God;
  - (c) Was raised by God from the dead;
  - (d) Is exalted by God and given the name “Lord”;
  - (e) Will come again for judgment and the restoration of all things.
- (3) Therefore, all who hear the message should repent and be baptized.<sup>9</sup>

What was the relationship in Acts between this core proclamation and the theme of the kingdom of God? F. F. Bruce has this to say:

“The things concerning the kingdom of God” at the beginning of Acts are identical with “the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ” at the end of the book (Ch. 28:31; cf. also Chs. 8:12; 20:24f.; 28:23). When they related the story of Jesus, the apostles proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God – the same good news as Jesus Himself had announced earlier, but now given effective fulfilment [sic] by the saving events of His passion and triumph. We may reasonably conclude that the teaching which He gave the apostles about the kingdom of God during those forty days was calculated to make plain to them the bearing of these saving events on the message of the kingdom. Luke supplies a sample of this teaching towards the end of his Gospel, where he describes the risen Lord as opening His disciples’ minds to understand the Scriptures and as telling them: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:45-47).<sup>10</sup>

Thus, we see the preaching of the kingdom by the Apostles was not a retelling of the Sermon on the Mount, but the proclamation of the work of Christ. As Paul summarized his message in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: *“For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the*

*scriptures; {4} And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.”*

Likewise, Gothard errs in equating *“the doctrine of Christ”* to the Sermon on the Mount, quoting 2 John 9: *“Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son.”* The context clearly shows that by *“the doctrine of Christ,”* John was here referring to the teaching of the incarnation.

*For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. {8} Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward. {9} Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son (2 John 1:7-9, KJV).*

The *“doctrine of Christ”* is the teaching that He has *“come in the flesh.”* At that time an early heresy called “Docetism” was being propagated. Docetism taught that Jesus only appeared to have a body, but was actually a spirit. This heresy was grounded in the belief that all things material are evil. Therefore, a sinless Christ could not have a material body. John sounded a warning against these heretics in 1 John 4:1-3 also:

*Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. {2} Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: {3} And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.*

Any teaching that denies the incarnation effectively eliminates Jesus as Savior. His bodily identification with us is necessary to His mediatorial work on our behalf: *“For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”* (1 Tim. 2:5). So, the concern of John with respect to *“the doctrine of Christ”* had nothing whatsoever to do with teaching the Sermon on the Mount. Once more, Mr. Gothard has demonstrated how he twists Scripture to prove his point.

## Grace in the Apostolic Message

When was the message of grace introduced? As seen above, Gothard teaches it was something added by Paul. However, the evidence of the New Testament does not bear this out. The Lord Jesus Christ first proclaimed grace, and it was from Him the Apostles learned this message. Luke 4:22 makes this clear: *“And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’”* Literally, the Greek text says they wondered at *“the words of grace that proceeded out of his mouth.”* This can either refer to the manner of Jesus’ speaking, or the content of His speech. If the former, it means nothing more than Jesus was a very pleasant speaker. If the latter, it means He talked about grace. The latter seems to be the case given the context. Recall that in verses 18 and 19 He has just quoted Isaiah 61:1-2a: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to*

(Continued on next page)



"Gothard" (Continued from page 11)

**set at liberty them that are bruised, {19} To preach the acceptable year of the Lord."** "Acceptable" translates the Hebrew word "rasón," an equivalent term to the Greek word for "grace," which is "charis" Jesus then proceeded to give two examples of undeserving Gentiles who were objects of grace (which prompted the mob to try and hurl Him from the cliff). Therefore, **"words of grace"** must mean He was teaching about the grace of God. Accustomed as they were to a "works-righteousness," this amazed the audience.

The introduction to the Gospel of John also attributes the origin of the message of grace to the Lord Jesus: (John 1:14-17, KJV) **"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. {15} John bare witness of Him, and cried, saying, This was He of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for He was before me. {16} And of His fulness have all we received, and grace for grace. {17} For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."** Jesus was full of grace; from Him we received abundant grace (grace upon grace), and He taught grace in contrast to Moses who taught the Law.

While the Gospels do not often use the term "grace" in connection with the teaching of Christ, the offer of grace is clearly present. It is seen in parables like the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), in forgiveness like that shown to the woman taken in adultery (John 8:2-11), and in miracles like the healing of the cripple let down through the roof (Mark 2:1-12). Even in His final moments, Jesus showed grace to an undeserving thief on the cross next to Him (Luke 23:42-43). Peter certainly considered his message to be one of grace as seen in his remarks to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:7-11 where he contrasts the "grace" of our Lord Jesus with the "yoke" of the Law.

The experience of the undeserved, unmerited grace of God has a softening and transforming effect on the heart. This has already been noted in connection with Titus 2:11-12. Paul testified to the power of grace upon his life when he said, **"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me"** (Gal. 2:20, KJV). The thought of the loving, unmerited gift of Christ on his behalf resulted in a life of dependent faith. Later, he would explicitly attribute victory over sin to grace, not the Law: **"For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace"** (Rom. 6:14, KJV).

Without a doubt, all the Apostles, having learned of grace from Jesus, proclaimed His message of grace. Grace, not a better, more searching statement of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount, transformed the lives of those who believed. It still does.

## Conclusion

Saint Augustine once said, "He who would give the meaning of Scripture, but does not derive it from the Scripture, is the enemy of Scripture." Bill Gothard does not derive the meaning of the message preached by the Apostles from the Scripture. On the contrary, he imposes his own moralistic ideas on the New Testament; ignoring the cross and minimizing grace in the process. The verdict of Dr. Ronald Allen says it all: "Gothard's use of Scripture is so suspect as to render him a poorly informed and untrustworthy teacher."<sup>11</sup>



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diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, ending his pulpit ministry. He continues a writing ministry.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Glory of the Cross*, [n.p., n.d.] pg. 6. Quoted by John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill., 1986. Pp. 42-43.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Gothard, *The Sevenfold Power of First Century Churches and Homes*, Institute in Basic Life Principles, Oak Brook, Illinois, 2000. Pg. 57.

<sup>3</sup> This omission is consistent with what we find in the Basic and Advanced Seminar textbooks. They also lack any discussion of the cross as a factor in Christian living.

<sup>4</sup> *The Sevenfold Power*, pp. 57, 58, and 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 61.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 58

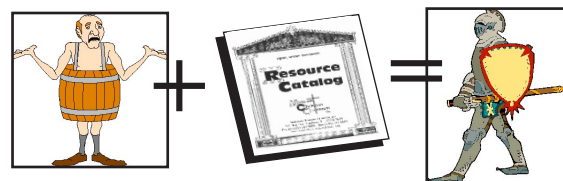
<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 59.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Manning Metzger, *The New Testament: its background, growth, and content*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1992. Pg. 177.

<sup>10</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on The Book of The Acts*, Wm. F. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1977. Pg. 34.

<sup>11</sup> "Issues of Concern – Bill Gothard and the Bible," Dr. Ronald B. Allen, 1984.

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# 1 Corinthians 5: A Proof Text for Disfellowshipping?

By Jonathan K. Miles



**I** wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.<sup>1</sup>

You are “*not to associate with any so-called brother ...*” The words seem harsh in a context of church—a community dedicated to love and unity. Paul is clearly indicating a drastic form of discipline for immorality. Various groups calling themselves “Christian” have used these words to legislate what we would call “disfellowshipping” or “shunning.” One of the most prominent (to many readers of this **Journal**) is, of course, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (WTBTS, a.k.a. Jehovah’s Witnesses). In most cases, the “*immoral person*” (immoral as defined by the WTBTS, that is) is completely cut off from the members of the JW congregation. In public, he is ignored, not spoken to, and treated as a non-person. While the JWs don’t advocate divorce from such “disciplined” spouses, Jehovah’s Witnesses go so far as to encourage children who are of age to withdraw from parents:

... If, the children are of age, then there can be a departing and breaking of family ties in a physical way, because the spiritual ties have already snapped. If children are of age and continue to associate with a disfellowshipped parent because of receiving material support from him or her, then they must consider how far their spiritual interests are being endangered by continuing under this unequal arrangement.<sup>2</sup>

According to the JWs, if the child doesn’t withdraw, their spirituality is questionable because they continue to have familial contact. Mere contact with a disfellowshipped person casts aspersions on the one who associates.

What is also remarkable is the condition of the disfellowshipped JW. Salvation in the WTBTS comes not just *from* the organization; *it is the organization*. Notice one *WATCHTOWER*\* description of the reinstatement of a disfellowshipped person:

There is no reason that he [the disfellowshipped] should be overly sad thinking that he could never get into God’s organization again and gain life in the new world.<sup>3</sup>

While he is disfellowshipped, he has no assurance of gaining eternal life. This is bolstered by the fact that anyone who has been disfellowshipped and wants to return to the congregation must not simply repent—his reinstatement is described as a “conversion.”

Can a disfellowshipped person be reinstated, get back into the organization? Yes, he can if he repents. But he has to go farther than that. He must be converted.<sup>4</sup>

Note also the instruction for elders:

If the wrongdoer is sincerely repentant, has discontinued his former wrong conduct and is “doing works that befit repentance,” he can be reinstated (Acts 26:20).<sup>5</sup>

What is interesting is the context of the cross-reference—Acts 26:20. The injunction was directed toward Gentiles who *had yet to believe*. They should repent and demonstrate their repentance by good works. They needed to be converted to Christianity not reinstated. But, a JW who is disfellowshipped is seen as needing conversion (as defined by the WTBTS) for salvation.

The passage that is often used to proof text this is 1 Cor. 5, where Paul admonishes the church “*not to associate*” or “*not even to eat*” with an disciplined member.<sup>6</sup> The question is what does Paul mean by “*not to associate*” and “*not to even eat with such a one*?” Do these concepts refer just to the corporate body or do they extend to individual interaction? Does this verse advocate complete isolation for the offending member? Is the person still regarded as a “believer,” or is he now considered an “unbeliever” as the WTBTS has determined? We will be examining Paul’s writings for the concept of exclusion and Paul’s usage of “*associate*” and “*eat with*” in an effort to define the limits of corporate exclusion. My goal is to guard against two extremes. The first is the abusive idea of disfellowshipping. The second is the mistaken emphasis on Church discipline being primarily only for the repentance of the immoral person and not the congregation, which *often* leads to an apathetic attitude toward sin in the congregation.

**“... There is immorality among you.”**

It is important to examine the situation that prompted Paul’s admonition in 1 Cor. 5. It had been reported to Paul there was immorality in the Church at Corinth. Apparently this was not a secret, for Paul chastises them for being arrogant and not dealing with the sin. Historian William Ramsey notes that in Corinth, a son taking his father’s wife (stepmother) would not be looked upon as that unusual. The Church at Corinth was holding to the low status quo of pagan morality.<sup>7</sup> Could it be the church considered it a private matter because Paul takes great pains, as we shall see, to emphasize the corporate responsibility the Church must take in dealing with this very public sin? I think so. It can also be speculated the woman in question was not a believer due to Paul’s silence regarding discipline for her.

So then, we have a situation where an unbeliever most likely divorced her husband and married her stepson. The son was a member of the Corinthian church and was openly engaging in something both biblically immoral and, according to Roman law, illegal.<sup>8</sup> The corporate body was not ashamed but “*puffed up*” and did not realize the implications of what this unchecked sin could do to the congregation. Paul wrote to chide them for their apathetic attitude, to warn them of the hazards of “*corrupting leaven*,” and to instruct them as to the proper way of dealing with unrepentant

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"Immoral Man" (Continued from page 13)  
sin in the congregation.

What were the results of his missive? If we can say with some certainty that the immoral man of 1 Cor. 5 is the same repentant man of 2 Cor. 2, then we know the church heeded Paul's advice and expelled this immoral brother which ultimately produced repentance and remorse. The man was genuinely sorrowful. So much so, that Paul now admonishes the Corinthians to **"forgive and comfort"** so that the man would not be **"overwhelmed by excessive sorrow."**<sup>9</sup> The discipline had brought about repentance and both the man and the church were saved from corruption. But what are the principles of exclusion? What did Paul set up in his instructions that we can apply to deal with sin in the congregation?

### **"A little leaven leavens the whole ..."**

Why is it the immoral man must be removed from the church? J. Carl Laney says it is for the restoration of the immoral person. The purpose of the discipline was primarily for the one disciplined.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the WTBS teaches the primary purpose is to **"keep the congregation clean."** Which emphasis is correct?

Brian Rosen argues that Paul's use of *"leaven"* and other parallels with the holiness code of the Pentateuch (Genesis-Deuteronomy),<sup>11</sup> indicate the primary purpose is to protect the church and keep it uncorrupted by unrepentant sin.<sup>12</sup> This is precisely the view of the WTBS. The congregation must be kept clean. I must acknowledge that I think the WTBS is correct on this point. Discipline is primarily to protect the Church. However, I think they completely misunderstand Paul's method for protecting the congregation.

It is precisely because the church is the *de facto* temple of God that it must remain uncorrupted by sin in its midst. To Paul, the only corruption affecting the body is that of its own members. This settles the problem of whether the immoral man is a believer or not. The presence of an unrepentant believer is the problem, not the presence of a non-believer.<sup>13</sup> In chapter 14, Paul indicates the presence of an unbeliever in worship does not affect the congregation. Likewise, an unbelieving spouse does not necessarily corrupt the believing spouse,<sup>14</sup> and eating with unbelievers is not prohibited.<sup>15</sup> It is precisely because this immoral person *is a believer* that he is a danger, not to individuals in daily life, but primarily to the congregation.

This completely contradicts the WTBS corporate salvation idea. In this instance, we have a person who is a believer and, yet, is excluded from the congregation. His actions are the *"leaven"* that can corrupt the **"whole lump"** of the Church. It is also assumed that this expulsion is the result of the immoral man ignoring the steps of discipline commanded by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the immoral man is a believer who threatens the purity of the Corinthian fellowship because of his willful rebellion. But how is the excommunication to be carried out? To what extent is he to be put out of the fellowship? What does Paul mean by συναναμειγνυμι (associate with) and συνεσθιω (eat with)?

### **"Remove the wicked man from among yourselves ..."**

Within the command to excommunicate are two implied injunctions in verse 11. Paul says he wrote to the Corinthians, in a previous letter: **"not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person."** Later in the verse, he adds: **"not even to eat with such a one."** The word for *"associate"* here is συναναμειγνυσθαι (associate/mix with)<sup>17</sup> When Paul writes

about the issues of holiness and immorality, he often employs words rarely used in the New Testament but having a substantial history in the Greek version of the OT—the Septuagint (LXX).<sup>18</sup> The Septuagint frequently uses this word to denote the purity of Israel. For example: **"Ephraim mixes himself with the nations/ Ephraim has become a cake unturned"** (Hosea 7:8). Here it refers to the 10 tribes mixing (συνανειγνυτο) with the nations, which brings judgment. Also most notably, Paul Rosen points out, is its use in Ezekiel 20:18 (LXX): **"Do not walk in the statutes of your fathers, nor observe their ordinances and in their ways do not mix (συναναμειψεσθε) and defile yourselves."**<sup>19</sup> These two verses are instructive because of their contexts. In Hosea, Ephraim is carried into captivity precisely because they have polluted themselves with wickedness. They are taken from their place of spiritual separateness and thrown into the nations. In Ezekiel, it is the warning not to begin to defile themselves with the *"ways"* that caused Israel to be sent into exile with foreign nations.

Both contexts bear a striking resemblance to the situation in Corinth. The Corinthian community was in the midst of immense idolatry, debauchery, and moral laxness. The danger was not from casual contact—speaking to or acknowledging the pagans. The danger was participating in their *"ways"*—to use Ezekiel's imagery. Paul admonished them not to engage in legal disputes like the Corinthian pagans.<sup>20</sup> This was because they were a community separated by a code of conduct based on their newly created status as the body of Christ. Likewise in Hosea, the issue wasn't casual contact. Xenophobia (fear of contact with foreigners) was not commanded by God,<sup>21</sup> but purity in religious practice (especially that of not making treaties with foreign nations) was.

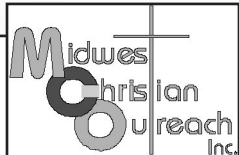
The precise reason the immoral person was to be excluded from the community was because he had gone *way beyond* mere contact with the world. He had actually *"mixed himself"* by following the ways of the pagans and had an immoral relationship with his father's wife. It is his *behaving like* the pagans, not his *contact* with them that excludes him. The immoral man has become like the pagans, so he is to be excluded from the community of believers. That Paul does not have in mind casual contact is bolstered by the only *other* passage in which he uses this word—2 Thessalonians 3:14.<sup>22</sup> Here Paul uses the same injunction not to *"associate"*<sup>23</sup> with anyone who does not obey his instructions in the letter. He cannot mean *"refrain from speaking"* or *"casual contact,"* because he adds: **"and yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him, as a brother."** Here not *"mixing with"* still allows speaking, casual contact, and certainly, kind regard.

What then of the injunction **"not to eat with such a one?"** Is this a command against an individual eating with a disciplined one, or is it a command to exclude that individual from the Lord's Supper? First let me note that, if it is an injunction to not share a meal with a disciplined believer, this still does not warrant the extreme shunning, ignoring, or avoiding advocated by the WTBS. Let me say it again. It is not casual contact with the disciplined one that defiles, but rather it is when the unrepentant person engages in the ongoing activities of the church with other members as though he were repentant.

Second, the context of the passage has repeatedly shown it is concerned with the *corporate* body. Even the OT passages cited seem to imply a corporate action. Paul has set up the corporate idea by using the plural form *"you are"* throughout the passage. Ben Witherington III makes the same distinction: *"What Paul says is addressed to the congregation as a whole and therefore speaks for*







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