

Church of God, The Eternal

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March 1983

Warmest Greetings Brethren:

Passover and Unleavened Bread are fast approaching. Time does not stand still. That fact alone indicates just how diligent we must be in carrying out the charge of spiritual growth and maturity in our own personal lives. For too long, in the past, we coasted along, smugly satisfied that our inclusion in a particular body would see us into the Kingdom of God. Yet, the initial test of FAITH saw most falter and fail in one way or another. Some forgot doctrine (the Truth), listening only to men and an organization. Others rejected everything by returning to the ways and concepts of sin out of which they had come.

Only with the responsibility of life squarely upon your shoulders are you beginning to manifest the character, conviction, and faith essential for the reward which you seek. If any good has been manifested from the past Church traumas (departure from the Truth), it is the fact men do not remain loyal to Truth on the basis of a fear for men or Church. You must come to love the Truth with all your hearts and minds. Then, when obedience is predicated upon your own personal convictions, all the antics of human beings cannot dissuade you. Why would you give up what you believe because of the failure of any other individual?

The above concepts are basic in the New Administration which Jesus Christ brought to light. Let us understand some of those basics.

We live in a very compact society. Labor relationships are highly interpersonal. Contact and communication are daily, if not hourly, requirements. Then, weekends often throw us into even more direct, personal, emotional involvements. Church services and other forms of personalized contacts can open up the fabled "Pandora's box" of human feelings. Disagreements. Strife. Contention. The tendency to criticize and condemn. Judging others can become a rampant obsession.

Should these things be? Is any one of them an acceptable exercise in the fulfillment of spiritual responsibility? Should any two human beings attempt to judge one another? Is any kind of judgment acceptable in this present age? Should the ministry exercise some form of evaluation and judgment of the brethren even though the laity is commanded to refrain from such responsibility?

The above questions reflect an age-old problem. Many human beings desire others to be censored and corrected -- but always on the basis of what they think is correct. Those who insist on others being judged and dealt with in some specific manner, most certainly do not feel that they themselves fall into any category which could ever necessitate such action. Their rationale, as to why, is endless.

Too frequently, some attempt to confuse the legal responsibilities of administration, under the terms of the Old Covenant, with the spiritually defined responsibilities instituted under the conditions of the New Covenant. Even a cursory perusal of these responsibilities will make it clear that a major difference exists between the Administration of the Old and the Administration of the New.

The Apostle Paul wrote: "He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant <New>, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?" (Hebrews 10:28-29.)

Note several things here: 1. In the Mosaic Dispensation, the guilty were caught, at least two witnesses required, and the punishment was meted out. 2. The ultimate punishment of those who violate the New Covenant will be much more severe. 3. The actual evaluation, judgment, and punishment of the New Testament violator is for the future. 4. The reason for future punishment, rather than an immediate one, is the granting of mercy.

Disobedience must be punished. But, under the terms of the New Testament, grace is offered -- space for repentance, change, and growth -- until the appointed day of judgment and final punishment. It is Christ who came to bring grace as an absolute requisite. Without grace, none of us would ever have a chance of making it into the Kingdom of God.

Since grace came through Christ, it is logical, then, that He administered this new administrative relationship while here in the flesh -- while going about doing the Work for which He was commissioned. We, as Christians today, are obligated to walk in His steps. Therefore, it is essential that we carefully observe the instructions, practices, and commands of Christ. By so doing, we can know exactly what we should do -- both laity and ministry alike.

For the March issue of the Monthly Letter, we will carefully evaluate the life and instruction of Christ relevant to the matter of judgment and other personal relationships as they apply to the ministry. If necessary, sometime in the future, the application of His instructions by the apostles, including the Apostle Paul, will be evaluated and made the basis of another Monthly Letter.

Now to the life and example of Jesus Christ. Those who followed Christ were but the continuation of the Body -- the Church of God. The Church is the Body of Christ. To be the continuation of that Body, the Christians obviously continued doing exactly what He did in His own lifetime. AS THE FIRST MINISTER OF THE NEW COVENANT ADMINISTRATION, HOW DID JESUS CHRIST CONDUCT THIS RESPONSIBILITY?

What duties did He fulfill? What specific instructions and commands did He give to those chosen to follow Him? Did He exercise any kind of judgment? How did He conduct Himself in relationship to those called? To those who are a part of the world? To those who had specific problems?

1. He came to teach and instruct.

". . . he <Christ> opened his mouth, and taught them. . ." (Matt. 5:2). In this case, Jesus was teaching the disciples -- those who would in the future, pick up the banner of responsibility to teach and instruct.

Though being subjected to harassment, Jesus instructed the multitudes, including the Jews who had asked the question, about the application of the seventh command of the great Decalogue (Matt. 19:1-9). The question asked by the Jews was a loaded one. They wanted to know if divorce were acceptable under any circumstance.

Jesus was not daunted by the subtlety of the question. He returned to absolute basics. For, He referred the interrogators to the marriage agreement established from the beginning. Humans were created male and female for the purpose of becoming one in marriage. How can that which has become one be divided at any time in the future? Only men, by misappropriation of authority, can set couples apart. Jesus said this must not be done. He made it quite clear that the circumstances prevailing in the time of Moses were not acceptable criteria for the Christian era of time.

Yet, an added conditional factor does play a significant part in this marriage determination. Divorce was not "legal" in the sight of God for any reason with the exception of "fornication" or fraud. Now, all of a sudden, this added conditional factor becomes involved. Determining a "legal" marriage becomes a matter of reading hearts and minds. But this generally is not within the capability of man. Furthermore, God never granted anyone the duty of interrogating mates or former mates to determine marital status. What is obvious in this is those involved in divorce and remarriage must read their own hearts and minds. They must determine the application of the "exception clause," or fraud, in their own circumstances. No place, in the New Testament, did Christ become involved in this futile endeavor.

But, instruct He did. How much plainer could Christ make the fact: A legitimate marriage is binding until death, that those who violate that sacred marriage are living in adultery. Yet, one fact is most apparent by the omission of anyone other than the parties involved in determining a "legally binding" marriage in the sight of God. No mention in the text is made of how a chosen servant of God should gather essential information in order to make fit and appropriate decisions regarding the status of those who had been married before and are now living in questionable relationships.

Why?

The answer is obvious: The decision must be made by the parties involved! But this is no different than the obligation incumbent upon any person deciding his level of obedience and response to other instructions and commands of God. If a decision must be made by each Christian regarding any one command of God, then it follows that similar decisions must likewise be made concerning every statute, law, command, and judgment of God. What a monumental task this would be for anyone involved in the ministry if judging and evaluating every member's level of faith and obedience to every command and Law of God were a requirement.

By example and instruction, Jesus did not judge marriage and divorce cases. He simply taught the Truth and without any reservation. He simply and emphatically stated, "And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Matt. 19:9).

There is no indication in the Bible that one must separate or submit himself to a thorough investigation of his divorce and remarriage case. So, the intent is obvious. The decision must be made by the ones involved who hear the Bible instruction and fear their God. When they make the decision, they cannot blame someone else for what happens in their lives. What they decide is strictly a matter of faith -- their own personal faith.

In the above text, there is no specific instruction regarding the Church status of one, or a couple, who continues to live in a questionable relationship. Jesus Christ did not even hint at the possibility of such a judgmental responsibility. Later, in this Letter, we shall see instructions and information pertinent to this question.

Concerning the basic question, "What is the direct responsibility of the ministry?" Jesus further elucidates, "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing" (Matt. 24:45-46).

God helping us, the above expectation of Jesus Christ, "giving meat in due season," is precisely what we hope to be doing at the time of the imminent return of our Savior. We desire to be effective and powerful in the proclamation of the true Way of Life. But, as you can readily see, there is no mention of judging others in this last-day responsibility. The blessing comes for courageous preaching of the Truth. Action, or response to that Truth, on the part of the individual, is a personal obligation. (God help us if we had to compel obedience.) Legislation and coercion do not produce faith. Faith is the manifestation of purpose, determination, character, and will on the part of the individuals involved.

Just before Jesus ascended to heaven, He gave specific instructions to His chosen apostles -- those commissioned to carry on the great Work which He had commenced. What were those instructions? Was judgment a part of that commission?

Christ instructed, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost <Spirit>: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world <age> . . ." (Matt. 28:19-20).

Once again, Jesus emphasized the necessity of teaching. No mention of judgment. As this command applied to the twelve apostles who followed Christ, so does it apply to those chosen of God to carry out that same responsibility in these last days -- the end of this age, a time specifically identified with the actual Second Coming of Jesus Christ (Matt. 24).

For those called and commissioned, there must be no adding to or taking away from the absolute instruction and command of Christ. His chosen ministry is commissioned to teach and preach. They are not now, and have never been, called to exercise judgment. That is a specific responsibility reserved for Christ, the One -- and only One -- appointed to carry out that duty at the time of His Second Coming.

From Christ's example, what should the preaching and teaching of the ministry be like? Since the New Testament ministry is the continuation of the ministry of Jesus Christ, we must look to the example set by Him. Christ "... came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and taught them on the sabbath days. And they were astonished at his doctrine: for his word was with power" (Luke 4:31-32). Jesus taught the people. He was forceful and direct. He did not conciliate or compromise. He taught with authority and conviction. But, He did not judge the individual lives of the hearers. His was not an administration of legalism. The respondents were required to act on faith -- not judicial necessity. The New Testament is replete with instruction relevant to the difference between Old and New Administrations. The New is predicated on mercy, tolerance, forgiveness, and space for personal mastery, overcoming, and spiritual growth -- none of which were available under the terms of the Old. The Old Testament Administration was a legal compact between Israel and her God. Obedience brought significant blessings of a physical nature, such as longevity of life. No promise of eternal life, however. Disobedience would result in deplorable curses which would adversely affect the recipients in every facet of life. The conditions were still such that even in the days of the apostles, Peter exclaimed, "And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them <Gentiles> witness, giving them the Holy Ghost <Spirit>, even as he did unto us; And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" (Acts 15:8-10.)

The laws, statutes, and judgments of God are called the way of liberty. They cannot possibly be the yoke of bondage to which Peter refers. What then is? It can only be the penal and administrative responsibility incumbent upon them under the terms of the Old Administration. That Administration and system of penalties -- including sacrifices -- was much greater than the people could bear. It reveals the scope of the sacrifice which Christ made for us. For, He was the sum total of that sacrificial administrative responsibility paid for us. How thankful and grateful we ought to be to Him. But, sometimes our gratitude is clouded by the fact, while we are most willing to accept His payment for our shortcomings, we are not as quick to grant that privilege and opportunity to others. The cure? See ourselves for what we really are -- using no deception. Then, we will really see others for what they are and need -- the mercy and help of God.

In John 3:1-21, Jesus Christ clearly illustrates the required change in our lives. The conclusion of that change is called a new birth. But, long before the actual birth, there are significant developments manifested in our demeanor of life.

In the above text, Jesus is once again teaching. An activity even the belligerent Jews were forced to admit. Though they would not admit it directly to Christ, Nicodemus, being troubled in mind and heart, came surreptitiously to Jesus and admitted that they all knew that He was a teacher sent from God.

Jesus said to Nicodemus that a fundamental change had to transpire in the minds of men. Though born of flesh, mankind had to undergo a spiritual change which involved the way they think and act. Being convicted by the influence of the Holy Spirit, called men and women must lay down their physical lives in the symbol of baptism. In essence, this is a burial of the old self. Then, coming up out of the watery grave, those whose hearts are right will be filled with the Spirit. This power gives them a new direction to life. The contrast is illustrated in Galatians 5.

Jesus came to teach and instruct. He is the model for both the lay-person and the minister. Out of love, He came to give His life a ransom for all mankind. He tendered unbelievable mercy and kindness. It was for these purposes that God, the Father, sent Christ into the world. We are told clearly that God did not send Jesus to condemn the world (John 3:17). If Christ is our example, the Good Shepherd, then is it not assumed that those who are called to continue the work, which God gave to Him, should be doing exactly the same thing? Indeed! We must be preaching and teaching. We must be clear and absolute in the proclamation of the Word and doctrine. But, we are likewise not sent to condemn or judge, but to manifest comparable love, kindness, and mercy.

Woe be unto us if we do not consistently teach the Truth which God promised to reveal. And reveal He did. An almost endless array of texts tell us that God performed His part -- the revelation -- in the last days. Unfortunately, those to whom this priceless way was given were not faithful. Changes became the order of the day. Changes not authorized of God. In fact, those changes were a rejection of God and the Truth. The faithful are admonished repeatedly: Be faithful -- continue in the way which was delivered.

In John 3:21, we are told that those who really love the Truth come to the light -- Christ, the revealed Way, for Christ is the Truth and the Way -- that their deeds may be made manifest. That is, they come to judge themselves. They want to know where they stand in their relationship with Christ and God. They are not judging others. They recognize the need to compare their lives to that of Christ and see how far short of the mark they fall.

Let us make it clear. The ministry has not been given the responsibility of judging anyone. They have been called to preach and teach the Truth. In fact, the ministry has not been given the powers and capabilities of even performing such judgment. We cannot read hearts and minds -- an absolute imperative to judge judiciously and effectively.

Why has the ministry not been given such powers and abilities? Because that duty is not ours to perform. Christ has already been designated as the One whom God holds responsible for such judgment. Further, the time has not yet come. Such judgment will occur at the time of His Second Coming.

Though Jesus did not judge, He very pointedly instructed. Note the example of the man whom He had healed of impotency (John 5:14). Knowing that the trials and difficulties which we experience are manifestations of sins in our lives, Jesus told the man to go and sin no more.

All human beings need to be instructed, corrected, and helped. For there is no man which sins not. As Paul said of himself, "I die daily" (I Cor. 15:31). It is a matter of crushing out the self on a daily basis.

But to judge another man in the fulfillment of that most serious responsibility is strictly forbidden. Rather than judge, condemn, and hold anyone in contempt, we should manifest much love, mercy, and compassion. We must be praying daily for one another.

If we pick on an individual whom we feel is sinning -- sins which we feel do not affect us -- are we not partial in the Law? Remember, there is no man that sins not. If we begin to condemn one another, we could conceivably experience complete anarchy -- each one condemning others on the basis of imperfect knowledge. What a situation that would be!

Further, if we consider some sins worse than others, we once again are partial in the administration of the Law. There is no such delineation found in the Bible. If we break any one principle, we are guilty of all.

God specifically revealed what aggressive intervention was necessary for the maintenance of peace and harmony. Blatant sin, heresy, and attitude problems must be dealt with -- not so much as a punishment for those involved, but a protection of the flock. And even in these situations, those at fault are not to be treated as enemies, but as brothers -- those in need of help and encouragement.

The most critical spiritual obligation incumbent upon us all is found in the statement of Jesus Christ in John 6:27-29. Here, once again, Christ is instructing. He said, "Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you; for him hath God the Father sealed. Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent."

Having been called, let us all really believe in Jesus Christ. Let us act on the Word which we have been privileged to receive of Him. There is no judgment of others involved in this obligation. Only the judgment of self and subsequent action resulting in personal mastery. Let us receive Jesus Christ -- manifested in diligent action (John 13:20). Such action is the true and genuine source of happiness and joy (John 13:17). Belligerence, condemnation, criticism of others, and ill-feelings of any kind have never produced the happiness of which Christ spoke.

If we really love Christ and the Father, let us aggressively keep the commandments of God, a duty incumbent upon each individual (John 14:15, 21). The judgment of how well each one has done in carrying out that personal responsibility is reserved for Christ at the appointed time.

2. He came to admonish and warn.

In Matthew 23:33, we read, "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?"

Humility of mind -- teachableness -- is imperative. A self-justifying and defensive spirit is not acceptable. All who come to God will be sinners. But some will come with the attitude of self-righteousness; whereas, others will come knowing their guilt and need of the mercy and love, as well as forgiveness, of Jesus Christ.

A true minister of Jesus Christ will speak forcefully and purposefully. He will proclaim the Truth which has been revealed. Those unknown areas -- in doctrine or personal behavior, he will leave to future revelation or judgment by Christ in His own time.

In Matthew 4:17, we read, "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." See also Mark 1:14-15.

The people were strongly instructed and encouraged to repent -- to change their way of thinking and acting. But there is no mention of specific judgment. For, repentance indigenously requires time -- space for repentance. Time requires tolerance, mercy, and a spirit of forgiveness. Mercy requires a continuation of love, understanding, and encouragement. Christ manifested all these traits consistently to the people with whom He worked for the entirety of His ministry.

In Matthew 10:27, we read, "What I tell you in darkness <secretly>, that speak ye in light <audibly, publicly>: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops."

The ministry is obligated to proclaim fearlessly the Truth. They must not compromise or mitigate for anyone -- friends, relatives, or whomever. But no place is there any instruction about judging the individuals who elect to respond to that preaching and instructing.

In Matthew 15:6-9, we read, ". . . Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition. Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."

This was very strong language, a personal indictment. However, it was not directed against the people, but of those who presumed to teach and instruct others. It was directed toward a ministry not called and commissioned by God. Any ministry which presumes to preach a message contrary to the Truth is guilty of sin. Here were teachers who had assumed to instruct the people, but not according to the message which God had originally delivered to the people of Israel -- at the time of Moses.

Yet, even here, one thing is missing. Jesus did not judge them. He censured and warned, but fell far short of rendering a specific judgment.

The responsibility of Jesus Christ is clearly laid out in John 3:34. It says, "For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him." God, the Father, gave a message to Jesus Christ. He was commissioned and sent to earth to preach that message. A basic requirement for a servant is to know the limits of his responsibility. Christ knew. He was commissioned to admonish and warn. Though judgment was given to Him, it was not to be exercised until later -- at the appointed time.

What about those who would be commissioned to follow Christ? Were they given greater responsibilities than those which Christ bore? Or, were they to carry out the same Work which He had begun in His own lifetime?

As a part of Christ's final instructions to those called to carry on the great commission, He specifically delineated their responsibility. He said, ". . . that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). That responsibility has never changed to this day. Why? Because the appointed day for judgment is still in the future.

3. To carry out specific responsibilities -- the commission.

Christ is our example. He did not perform as He willed. He came to do the will of the Father. He said, "For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak" (John 12:49). The command of the Father involved the obligation to speak, not judge. This we will see very clearly just a little later.

At the conclusion of Christ's earthly ministry, He said, "I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do" (John 17:4). What was that work? We are told in John 17:14, "I have given them thy word . . ." What Word was this Jesus had delivered? None other than that message which the Father had delivered to Him -- the message which He reviewed in John 12:49.

The tenure of Christ here on this earth was limited. He said that it was essential for Him to return to Heaven from which He had come. Was there no further work to be done? With His departure, was the commission completed? Indeed, not! There was a Work to be done. And that Work was exactly the same as God, the Father, had delivered to Jesus.

When training the disciples, Jesus sent them out to do a specific work. He specifically delineated the work incumbent upon those trainees. Notice that commission in Matthew 10:1, 7-8. We read, "And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them <demons> out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease." "And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is a hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils <demons>: freely ye have received, freely give." Compare the above with Luke 9:1-2.

No command to judge is found here. All the duties involved in the commission were acts of service and kindness.

If specific judgmental responsibility was later given to the apostles, it must yet be conferred upon them by Christ. Is there any place where this obligation was given to them?

Of all the places which speak of the transfer of the responsibility of Christ to His chosen apostles, only two are most specific. First, let us note John 17:18. When addressing the Father, in prayer, Christ said, "As thou <Father> hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world." With what responsibility was Christ commissioned? To preach the Word -- the Words which God had given to Him. Thus, Christ conferred the duty of continuing to proclaim that same Word upon His chosen apostles. And there was no duty or obligation of judgment.

Second, Christ repeats and emphasizes this commission in John 20:21. We read, "Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." Woe be to the minister who does not continue to proclaim the message which God delivered. Both presumptive and hireling individuals will be rigidly judged at the appointed time of judgment. The ministry must preach the Truth -- the Truth, or faith, originally delivered. It is the responsibility of the individual to judge his own life -- judgment on the basis of what he hears and understands.

The element of personal judgment is incumbent upon us all at this time. The Word is powerfully preached, then by the action of the promised Holy Spirit we become convicted. We see ourselves for what we really are. The process of growth and mastery commences. As we grow and effect required mastery in our lives, further revelation will be given. That revelation will not change the previous Truth, but will add to our present spiritual stature. See John 16:7-15.

4. No duty to coerce those called is placed upon the ministry.

The duty of the ministry is to preach and serve. They must be alert to the Words which God has delivered to them. They must never compromise on the basis of money, prestige, or friendship. They are commissioned to carry out a message delivered by God, the Ruler of the universe.

But they are under no requirement to attempt any form of compulsion regarding each member's personal responsibility. Each individual is responsible, if called by God, to hear, understand, and respond to the teaching which is delivered.

Legislated faith is utterly useless. In fact, it is not faith at all. On the contrary, it is a form of fear -- fear of men or an organization. Such fear is a form of idolatry. For we are to fear God -- to fear to do wrong and/or act contrary to the teachings which He delivers.

The above concepts are strongly implied in an example Christ taught. It is the example of Lazarus and the rich man. We shall concern ourselves with the conclusion only. Let us note Luke 16:30-31. The rich man had run into serious difficulty. He knew his fate. He had acted less than benevolently during his lifetime. Knowing what his fate was, he began to rationalize about the future of his relatives. His desire was that someone who had been through the experience of death and had come to know the certainty and accuracy of God's Word, would go and teach those who were still alive. This rich man said: ". . . Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent."

But, what was Abraham's response? This response lays the burden of obedience squarely upon our own individual shoulders. We cannot hold anyone else liable. Response to the teaching, which God delivers, becomes the duty -- yes, even the absolute obligation -- of each individual who is called to understand. For Abraham said to the rich man, ". . . If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." Obedience is not a mysterious act. It is a simple matter of will -- the will of the individual who is called to understand, and then is held accountable for his actions. Anyone, at this time, can circumvent this spiritual obligation by

hiding in ignorance, uncertainty, or refusal to be honest with available information.

Presently, we are held accountable for coercing our own selves to obey that which has been revealed to us. But, it is not a matter of legislation on the part of the ministry. The ministry is called and commissioned to preach and teach the Truth. Those who hear that proclaimed Word can coerce themselves to obey or choose to reject the knowledge because they rely upon the carnal mind to evaluate. The decision of obedience, or disobedience, is personal.

5. Christ acted mercifully and kindly -- to all peoples.

Christ came to bring Truth and mercy. What is the underlying significance of the concept of mercy? Without human frailty, there would be no need for mercy. The essentiality of mercy mandates compassion for those innate frailties. And who is the author of this frail being? God. He made us of the weakness of the dust of the ground. He created within us the natural natures with which we struggle. For these reasons, God loved this struggling human race with all its weaknesses. He loved them so much that He was willing to give the life of His Son to redeem them from the curse of flesh.

The Creator of mankind is Christ. He was the Spokesman of the Old Testament. How did He behave toward these very beings whom He had created? Remember, Christ is not only the example of how each of us would respond to others, but also the role-model for the ministry.

Jesus Christ was the beginning of the Church, spiritually. He was the firstborn Son -- the firstborn of many who are to follow (Compare Rev. 12:1-5; Matt. 23:1-3; and Acts 7:37-38). In a sense, how He conducted after Himself in relationship to others sets the example for us today.

Though the Scribes and Pharisees sat in the seat of Moses -- in the Old Testament Church of God, which began in the wilderness -- Christ befriended them consistently regardless of the propensity for hypocrisy, dishonesty, cunning, and self-righteousness. If they still sat in the seat of Moses, it is quite obvious that they were at least nominally members of the Church. Yet, Christ did not treat them with contempt and disdain.

Neither did He avoid the publicans and sinners. He was involved socially with them -- partaking of meals and entering the conversation. To the hypocritical Pharisees, this action was anathema. But, what did Christ say about it? ". . . They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matt. 9:12-13).

Christ strongly intimated, those who are critical and condemnatory toward others -- the righteous in their own eyes -- are not going to pay heed to instruction or example. They are self-satisfied. They know that they are righteous and have no need of change or help. On the other hand, those who manifest teachableness and humility of mind -- regardless of sins and problems will be receptive to instruction and help. These are the ones Christ called and with whom He is working. The same applies for any true minister called to carry on the Work which He began. Toward them He manifested great mercy and kindness. Should it not be obvious, one cannot help any person with an attitude of rejection, contempt, and disgust?

Personally, we have found great satisfaction in working with people -- regardless of the number of years involved -- bringing them closer to that state of perfection expected by God. This is the example set by Jesus Christ Himself.

Does mercy and kindness imply condonation? Of course not! It manifests only the desire to give sufficient time for required change. Some changes are difficult to make and do require much consideration and patience. The true shepherds are ever willing to grant that time and encouragement.

What are some of the examples of Christ's mercy and affectionate regard for the problems of people with whom He dealt? Surely, they are significant lessons for all of us. Specifically, for the ministry -- since Christ is the first minister of the New Covenant Administration. Also, however, for all others called to conform to the behavior of Christ -- for He is the example of all who will to be obedient servants of His.

"Then Jesus called his disciples unto him, and said, I have compassion on the multitude, because they continue with me now three days, and have nothing to eat: and I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint in the way" (Matt. 15:32). Compassion is compassion. It knows no bounds. Christ's concern was not limited. As indicated in other texts, He knew the people were following Him for food and the privilege of seeing miracles. Yet, He had a deep feeling for deceived humanity. If it were a matter of helping only those who knew and understood the Truth, why did not Jesus just call all the people to understand? But, He did not call them. Yet, He was most kind and concerned.

We know that some of the people accepted Christ and were truly a part of that Body which formed the New Testament Church. There are no indications of separate meetings of these people (though He did discuss many matters privately with His disciples). They must have been present in the public meetings which Christ conducted throughout Galilee and Judea. On one occasion, when Christ was speaking rather forcefully and pointedly, many of the people turned back. Christ turned to the disciples and others present and said, "Will you also turn back?" Obviously all the people were there together. Does this imply that we should invite the public? Absolutely not! But if one manifests an interest, by attending meetings -- Sabbath or other times -- it certainly would be foolish to rudely usher him out. Christ turned no one away. He served them all. He had compassion on them all. Should we not do the same?

What kind of attitude should we have toward other people -- even people who have difficulties and are, perhaps, living in questionable circumstances? And those questionable circumstances can involve any commandment of God -- not just one or two which we tend to isolate for specific emphasis.

What attitude is acceptable to God? Jesus gave an example which clearly explains and demonstrates this need. It is found in Matthew 18:1-14. He used a little child to underscore His illustration. We must receive the Truth and the Way of Life as a little child. We must be teachable and pliable. But above all, we must be forgiving and implicitly tolerant. Are not children?

And if God has called an individual, and is working with that party, woe be to the person who would generate offense or despair. Christ died for all. Who are we to judge anyone? When called, all people are making mistakes.

They will not overcome instantly. For, all human beings need time -- space -- for mastery and the required overcoming. As little children grow up to adulthood, so must the child of God grow into the full stature of Jesus Christ.

When necessary, we had better go out of our way to encourage and even seek out those offended if we have been guilty of injury -- by mouth or action. God is aware of them and their prayers.

In John 4:15-42 is the account of Jesus conversing with the woman of Samaria. He was certainly pointed in the proclamation of the Truth. Being the Christ, He had a significant advantage over any minister today. He could not only read minds and hearts, but also knew what conditions and circumstances lay ahead. He even knew the past without asking for any information. Yet, in the final analysis, Jesus did not judge and legislate in this matter. This woman was most instrumental in aiding many of her own people to hear the Truth. But, there is absolutely no evidence that Christ told her she had to separate from this fifth husband or she could not be a part of the group which responded to the Truth. If she did separate, that would have been to her credit. For, that is the purpose of coming to the Truth. But, she would have made the decision to obey on her own. Such a decision was not legislated obedience.

It is this factor which we are attempting to make plain. People must hear the Truth, become convicted, and then individually act upon that conviction on the basis of faith. From that point on in their lives, the element of growth becomes imperative. Growth is necessitated for two reasons: 1. Because of future revelation, and; 2. The need to be strengthened in hope and faith in order to act more perfectly on what one has already comprehended. The latter of these two reasons dictates the essentiality of tolerance.

When we speak of administration, we refer to the necessity of each individual acting upon the Word on the basis of his own faith. Legislated faith is that faith predicated upon the will and judgment of another party. Such faith will not sustain an individual in the time of trial and difficulty. We desire people to make their own decisions -- regardless of the situation confronting them. Further, we choose not to act partially in the exercise of this responsibility. One sin is just as great as another. Those who would condemn another have already committed sins requiring the mercy of God just as great as the individual who fails in some more specific manner. Sin is sin.

In the case of this Samaritan woman, Jesus Christ evidenced much mercy, understanding, and compassion. He raised the eyebrows of those who were still considerably influenced by the physical administration of the past. They could not understand even the reason why He was standing there talking to her. For, these Samaritan people were not even considered worthy of any contact with the elite from Judea. But Christ had come to break down all these old taboos and barriers. He came to become the Savior of the world. His compassion, mercy, and kindness knew no bounds. What about ours?

In a classic case of adultery -- the woman taken in adultery -- with which Jesus was confronted, He manifested considerable love, compassion, and mercy. He did not condone the act. But, on the other hand, He did not rail and accuse. He simply said to her accusers, ". . . He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (John 8:7). Are any of us perfect? If we have come to that pinnacle of perfection in our lives, perhaps we are entitled to condemn and hold in contempt anyone who does not live up to our

standard. But, let us remember, the only perfect individual who ever lived on this earth, Jesus Christ, did not so conduct Himself in this manner in His relationships with other human beings. Should we not emulate His example, regardless of how much we have overcome?

By kindness we do not condone wrong. Did God condone sin when He arranged for the death of His own Son to pay the price of sin? If God has all power and can call whomsoever He pleases, and whenever He pleases, is it not obvious He tolerates sin for a time? Does not the purpose of God stand supreme, regardless of the time involved for change and overcoming?

Our responsibility is to master ourselves -- to overcome and put on the character and nature of God. In our relationships with other human beings, we must manifest the full dimension of love, tolerance, mercy, understanding, and compassion. For, this is the very essence of the spiritual change required in our lives.

What other examples did Christ leave for us -- especially for the ministry?

6. He came to serve the people -- without thought of position or reward.

A minister is a servant. He is a servant of the people whom God has called. Such an act of service does not mean that a minister is a vassal of the people -- subject to their demands or whims. On the contrary, He is the obedient servant of God, with duties oriented to those called as His children. He must not take advantage of them or abuse them in any manner. This act of service must be genuine, from the heart, without thought of personal gain or recognition.

Christ was the perfect example. God, the Father, sent Him to carry out His will. He gave Him the very Words He was to teach. He prescribed the limits of His ministry. As our ministerial example, what lessons of service did He leave for us?

In Matthew 20:20-28 is an incident employed by Jesus Christ to teach a very valuable lesson. Here we find the disciples manifesting the natural tendencies of human nature. They were concerned with the ranking they were to receive in the Kingdom. This altercation came from one basic human concept -- a concept which they had experienced throughout their lives. That concept? A servant is to do the dirty and hard work for the one in position of power and prestige. The elite live in luxury and ease, with authority over others.

How tragically wrong the disciples were. At this point, they did not understand the real purpose of service. Jesus clarifies.

First, Jesus let the disciples know that assignment of positions and responsibilities is the duty of God. That decision would be made on the basis of personal dedication and work performed.

Second, because of the surfacing indignation of the disciples, who simply did not understand, Jesus said, ". . . Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among

you, let him be your minister <servant>; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" (Matt. 20:25-27).

Positions are rightly established for the avenue of service only. They are not for pomp and ceremony. How tragically reversed have become the concepts of men. They struggle for position. But for a position of power whereby they can exercise dominionship over other human beings. Such a relationship was never intended by God. Indeed, men cannot rule over men. How often have you seen men become voluntary servants of those over whom they have been given a charge? The classic example of this self-negation is that of Christ.

In Matthew 20:28, we read, "Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." Any servant -- true servant -- of God is amply and abundantly verified by his acts of service -- service without thought of any physical position or return. A true servant is a man who has dedicated his life and energies to the service of the called children of God. Anything less than such an act of service is not acceptable to God. A true servant must be implicitly and completely responsive to the instructions and commands of the One who called him to serve.

How clearly and emphatically Christ spelled out this principle in Matthew 23:10-12. We read, "Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted." How clear! This is the standard by which any minister can be determined. No one can be responsible to two sources of authority. Remember Matthew 6:24-34. In like manner, it would be impossible for a minister to be obedient both to God and to the people. Likewise, it would be impossible for the people to be obedient both to God and to a minister who instructs them to act contrary to that which God has revealed. The line of responsibility becomes very clear. God, first, as the author of a Way of Life. Next is the absolute authority of the Word which cannot be changed. Followed by the ministry which God called and commissioned to proclaim that Way of Life. Finally, we have the people called of God, people who are the object of the whole exercise of the ministry.

What really speaks with absolute authority? The Words of life which God revealed. No human being can speak with authority, who has not received those Words. For without them, each individual is simply espousing his own concepts -- that which is right in the sight. The people, therefore, must be responsive to the ministry only if they adhere to that originally revealed Truth (Deut. 13:1-5).

Jesus said, "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:4-5). He certainly knew that He could not do "His own thing." He was under obligation to fulfill the purpose of God. The Father had given Him the Words of life He was commissioned to proclaim. It was those Words which verified Him as the true servant of God. Will it be any less for His servants today? Indeed not! Those same Words were given to the true servants in the last days. The problem lies in the fact, those to whom He gave the Words of life did not wholly love them. Because of this deficiency of love, they were willing to compromise -- teaching different doctrines for dishonorable reasons.

No true minister will desert the sheep -- for whatever reasons (John 10:10-13). A good shepherd will remain concerned for the welfare and safety of the sheep. He will give his life in faithful obedience. This is an act of service. In no way is he involved in the ministry for personal gain. He is the servant of God. His concern is the flock. These actions will obviously indicate the true servants. They will be faithful to the Word originally revealed -- revealed in our day, just as it was in the days of the writing of the New Testament. They will be self-sacrificing -- giving their lives and energies for the sheep. They will be concerned for the needs, encouragement, and help which all the sheep need -- without any partiality.

But, those ministers will not be judging the lives of the individuals. They will be teaching and instructing on the basis of the Word delivered to them. Their example, Jesus Christ, instructed and taught only. We can do no more than the example, Christ, allows.

7. He did not personally judge the people in His earthly ministry.

When speaking of the resurrection, Jesus addressed the question of judgment (John 5:22-31). He explained that all judgment has been committed to Him. The time in which He will carry out this responsibility is at His Second Coming. That is the appointed day of separation -- the wheat from the tares. It is the time of determination for all who have been called and given an opportunity to know the Truth. A process which will be carried out progressively, through a number of years, after Christ's return to the earth.

But, what did He do when here in the human flesh -- here as a servant of God? Did He judge at that time?

Concerning an adulterous situation, Jesus said, "Ye judge after the flesh; I judge no man" (John 8:15). Men tend to judge according to the feelings of the flesh -- what they think they see or what they think to be right. But, Jesus said: "I judge no man." He, while here carrying out His ministerial commission, despite an ability to see in the past as well as the future, did not judge human beings. There can be only one possible explanation. Judgment was, and is, not a part of the ministry at this time.

In conclusion, one statement of Christ puts it all together. Let us carefully note it. Christ said, "And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak. And I know that his commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto me, so I speak" (John 12:47-50).

In this context two significant texts must be considered. They are Matthew 18:15-20 and John 20:22-23.

It is imperative that we remember the Word of God is not self-contradictory. Jesus said He judged no man. He was sent to preach, teach, and admonish. The New Testament ministry is carrying on that same commission. Therefore, neither Matthew 18, nor John 20, is a requirement to judge.

This cursory review is not a complete exegesis of the texts. But, let us note just a few important matters in relationship to the duties of the ministry.

In Matthew 18:15-20 Christ is discussing the resolve of KNOWN wrongs, not alleged sins or guesses. The primary requirement falls upon the shoulders of the brethren -- both the first and second steps of this procedure. If the involved parties cannot graciously resolve the conflict, witnesses must be produced. The obvious implication: If there are not legitimate witnesses, the case must be dropped and forgotten. But is this legal procedure best for all concerned? No. What is best? Suffer yourselves to be wronged (I Cor. 6:1-10). Here the Apostle Paul instructs the people to handle these confrontations among themselves. The ministry was not involved. If real love prevails, there will be the desire to accept wrong rather than create an untenable situation.

Back to Matthew 18. In the event of last resort, the third step of this procedure, it should be brought to the Church -- obviously implying the ministry. If the wrong is unquestionable (the genuine original complaint, plus available witnesses), the ministry can make a determination. The offender is restrained from further fellowship with the brethren. Remember, however, this involves KNOWN wrongs -- not guesses or presumptions.

Lastly, the ministry can do one of two things. They can either bind or loose. The requirement of "loosing" is predicated on the fact either insufficient evidence was available or an inherent need to manifest mercy.

What is obvious is this: We are not dealing with matters involving the accuracy of the laws, statutes, and judgments of God. It is preposterous to assume any minister can decide (bind or loose) the validity of any command. In this text, we are dealing with personal relationships among the brethren -- situations arising from frequent contact (note vs. 15), not judgments related to the ultimate application of the Law. Why? Because Jesus did not judge; neither should we.

John 20:22-23: Basically, John is saying exactly the same thing Matthew was inspired to write. As in Matthew's account, the final judgment was that of the ministry. In the one case, the ministry refused to overlook guilt; whereas, in the other case, the problems were dismissed and forgotten -- and for reason.

Let us be candid, can a minister today look at a particular individual and decide his status before the spiritual Law of God? Do we really believe that? Brethren, NO MAN IS ABOVE THE LAW. The final Judge of us all is Christ.

Once again, in John, we are addressing absolutes. John is speaking of absolute transgressions. He is not referring to alleged sins or questionable circumstances. On the one hand, those absolute (KNOWN) sins were retained (NOT FORGIVEN). On the other hand, absolute sins were remitted (FORGIVEN). Whose determination was this? The ministry. So, the ultimate responsibility rested with the ministry. This was not a matter of carrying out the expectation of some other individual in the Church. If the ministry -- out of mercy and compassion -- chose to overlook the situation, the decision was to be accepted. The situations under consideration generally were personal matters, not matters which involved the entire Church membership. Remember "Church," in Matthew 18:17, obviously refers to the ministry.

One thought alone should help. In both cases, we are dealing with absolutes, nothing questionable or in doubt. Mercy, compassion, and encouragement are vastly superior to legalism (John 1:17; Jas. 2:8-13; II Pet. 3:18; Rom. 14:4, 12; Rev. 2:21).

Those things which must be handled by the ministry are creators of disunity in the Body: Heresy, blatant sin, and volatile attitudes. Personal growth and mastery are not ours to evaluate.

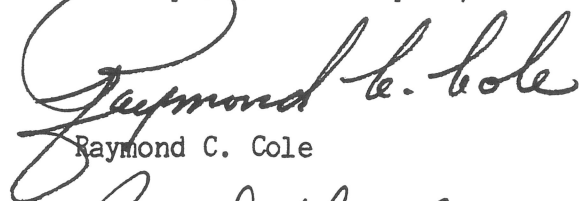
God gives the Words of life to those called to be His ministers. The ministry is under absolute obligation to proclaim those Words given. Of the people, those called will hear and act according to that proclaimed Word. Rate of growth is a very personal matter. Failures and weaknesses will manifest themselves. For that reason, the Bible clearly instructs the ministry to preach, correct, rebuke, and instruct, but with all tolerance and forbearance. The final act, in this process, is judgment. That judgment is carried out at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, the One to whom all judgment is assigned.

Let us all make greater effort than ever to live up to the Truth which God has so graciously given to us. Let us realize the necessity of judging the self -- applying the instruction which we have heard and received. We are responsible for our own lives -- for no one else's. With regard to others, let us learn what it is to be merciful, kind, and tolerant, just as Jesus was.

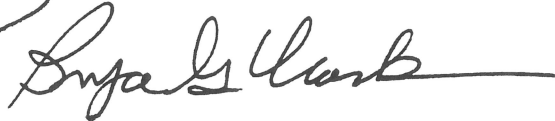
For the next Letter, which I will write, God willing, I will return to the incomplete subject of "Two Facets of Knowledge." There are two sub-topics yet to be covered.

Please take care of yourselves. We are living in most trying times. Only faith and perseverance will see us through these times. Remember, the reward on the other end is worth it all.

In deep love and respect,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Raymond C. Cole". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Raymond C. Cole

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bryce G. Clark". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Bryce G. Clark