

Church of God, The Eternal

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Dear Brethren:

In this month's issue we want to address another important topic related to self-evaluation and introspection. There is no greater responsibility for any true Christian than to purge out one's natural carnality and replace it with the mind of Jesus Christ. If it seems like we focus a great deal on such issues, it is only because we understand it is critical to avoid the dangerous spiritual slumber that has engulfed the majority of God's people in these last days.

With that in mind, how much do we care about what others think? How many of our personal decisions are made with strong consideration for how our actions will make us appear in the eyes of others? Who are we trying to please or impress? From whom are we seeking acceptance and approval? These are the questions we want to analyze from God's viewpoint, to help us to recognize the natural forces at play in our minds, to avoid spiritual traps, and ultimately to make positive choices.

Inherent Dependence Upon Others

Some will say, "I don't care what anyone else thinks. I am what I am, and if anyone doesn't like that, it doesn't bother me." This is an attempt to make oneself appear strong, independent, and unflappable in the face of personal criticism. Such independent-mindedness is viewed as a virtue by many. We all can recall examples of outstanding leaders in history who went against the grain to do what was right, even when it was very unpopular at the time. They gave up popularity in their own times to act upon strong convictions, satisfied to allow history to judge whether they were right or wrong. Examples include Winston Churchill in Great Britain and Abraham Lincoln in the United States. Both men were very unpopular at critical times in their public lives. Both were likewise undaunted in doing what they believed to be right in spite of the ridicule heaped upon them by respected pundits of their generations. In both cases, the citizens of these countries now look back with admiration and thankfulness for those men who did not allow popular opinion to dissuade them from their moral determination.

One of the reasons we esteem such men is because it is so unusual to find anyone truly willing to step out against the forces of popular opinion for a just cause. Human beings—by nature—are driven by "herd instinct." They seek security in the acceptance of others. The old adage, "safety in numbers," is at the root of our thinking. Anyone who claims he is not affected by that force is being dishonest. Anyone claiming he does not care what others think is either a phony or seriously self-deceived. It is part of the human nature God gave to every one of us. It is important to come to acknowledge this real aspect of our fleshly minds. However, most people will not do so. That is why we see many make sweeping claims about how independent they are, and assert how little they care what others think. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

Ironically, another classic trait of human beings is to deny the real motives for their actions. Therefore, even though the reason someone might take a particular action is to protect or promote his personal reputation, he will often shield it in a cloak of deception, claiming some moral idealism as his true cause. There is nothing we like more than to have our cake and eat it too. There is nothing more satisfying—humanly—than to get away with something totally selfish while simultaneously being perceived by others as magnanimous and self-deprecating. For example, think about all of the philanthropic gifts made by wealthy individuals. Do we really believe those gifts to charity are all made because of genuine concern for fellow man? In this country, because of the structure of our tax code, the wealthy are actually benefitted economically by giving great sums to charity. Amounts not given away would likely be taken by the government in the form of taxes, and might even *decrease* the individual's net income if not donated. The same is true of large corporate donations, which are really *investments* to create goodwill within the community, with the expectation of generating more profits in the end. So what better opportunity than to profit from a supposed "sacrifice" for some worthy cause, building a positive personal or corporate legacy in the minds of others? How many powerful tycoons have made their fortunes from ruthless and dishonest business practices, only to spend a portion of those fortunes in later years trying to buy a reputation of philanthropy and humanity? It is nothing short of rank hypocrisy. But do not think you or I would not be tempted by the very same treachery if we were in their shoes. Again, what we are talking about is a characteristic common to *all* human beings, regardless of social station.

What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one (Romans 3:9–12).

So man likes to delude himself that he is independent-minded, yet he is always consumed with improving his perception in the sight of others for personal gain.

Another case in point: The teenager rebels against parental and societal authority, claiming to seek freedom of self-expression, and refusing to be constrained by traditional and outdated customs. So he goes out of his way to dress, speak, and behave in atypical ways. When asked why he has blue, spiked hair, multiple body piercings and tattoos, and wears clothes that are garish and ill-fitting, he claims, "I'm just trying to be myself." What does that really mean? He claims to be unconcerned with what others think. He says he is expressing his true individuality, without regard for the perception of others. But is that really true? Of course not. He is *very* concerned about what his *friends* think. He associates with others who also have colored hair, body piercings, tattoos, and strange clothing. In fact, if he did not do those things, he fears he would be ostracized from his current circle. So the reality is, this young person is not really independent-minded at all! He is just as desirous of acceptance among his peers as anyone else. So it is true with all humanity. Rebellion against the establishment is never a proof that one is not concerned with what other people think. It only means the group he seeks to impress is outside the mainstream. But in any case, he is still *seeking to impress*!

Given this carnal absolute in all of us, how much do we—as the called of God—still care about what others think, and who are we really trying to please? If you can answer these questions *absolutely honestly* before God, you will be able to admit where you stand spiritually, and then be positioned to make effective progress in overcoming that self.

God's Way in Contrast to Man's

By comparison to the natural traits of man described above, the character of God is exactly opposite. Mr. Herbert Armstrong effectively described this distinction as the way of give vs. get. Everything man does involves the goal of helping self—one way or another—and at the expense of others if need be. But God's way is a legitimate outpouring of concern and sacrifice for others, without hidden agendas or strings attached. Since a true Christian is required to crucify the old self and become a living sacrifice, it takes a total transformation in thinking to fulfill that command.

Therefore, if the carnal man inherently yearns for acceptance of others to edify personal status and reputation—the way of get—God's way requires the abandonment of all such vain and selfish efforts and a willingness to serve unconditionally, without expectation of reward—the way of give. This means we have to stop making decisions on the basis of augmenting our personal reputations and status.

Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also

should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin (Romans 6:3–6).

Serving sin means continuing in the natural ways of man, which are focused on self in opposition to God's laws. God requires a total transformation in thinking:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. *Let us not be desirous of vain glory*, provoking one another, envying one another (Galatians 5:22–26) [emphasis mine].

This vainglory is exactly what we are talking about: an inherent desire to make oneself look good to others, and therefore to be concerned with making decisions which will enhance that personal reputation.

What Should Be Our True Goal?

If man is naturally obsessed with what other's think, and we must root out that selfishness and vainglory, does this mean our goal should be to reject having any concern whatsoever for anyone's opinion of us? Not at all. Should not we always care what God thinks of us? Did not we commit to this revealed way of life because we desire to have God's favor and to be judged worthy of entering into His Kingdom? Is it wrong to desire personal salvation in God's Family, which certainly benefits the self? Of course not.

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you (Matthew 6:33).

And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force (Matthew 11:12).

God gave His called ones personal incentives to encourage them to make necessary sacrifices, that they might inherit His Kingdom. He wants us to set that goal and attain it! And Christ said it is the aggressive ones that want it most who will "take it by force." In that way, one could argue we are still involved in a selfish endeavor to gain someone's approval—God's—so we can personally be benefitted. Perhaps that is true. But if so, it must

be an application of personal pursuit that God approves, else He would not have designed His entire master plan for man's salvation with such incentives. Yes, our goal is to become God—a member of the very eternal Family of God. If you told that to most people in the world, they would certainly think you arrogant and self-absorbed. But we have been promised glory.

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, *then shall ye also appear with him in glory* (Colossians 3:1–4) [emphasis mine].

Therefore, it must not be wrong to seek personal glory, if we are seeking to fulfill the will of the Creator God who made us and seeking the right kind of *future* glory He is offering. This must define the difference between a righteous glory and what God calls "vainglory." Jesus Christ is our perfect example. He gave Himself fully to comply with His Father's plan. He became a perfect living sacrifice for us all—the epitome of love. But did He not also receive a great reward for His efforts, and was He not working the whole time to maintain His Father's favor?

I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, *glorify thou me* with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was (John 17:4–5) [emphasis mine].

So Jesus Christ certainly was seeking personal glory. He cared very much what His Father thought of Him and wanted His approval. He oriented His whole life around pleasing another—His Father—and maintaining His favor. Since He is our example, that cannot be wrong. What must be wrong, therefore, is 1) seeking personal favor from anyone but our Creator and Sustainer, 2) seeking any kind of glory that is not authorized by God, and 3) attempting to achieve that glory by any means but obedience to God's eternal commands as in Jesus Christ's example:

But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning *chosen you to salvation* through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to *the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and *hold the traditions which ye have been taught*, whether by word, or our epistle (2 Thessalonians 2:13–15) [emphasis mine].

Yes, this is the key to understanding what our true spiritual goals should be, and how those goals differ from man's natural pursuit of acceptance and reward—vainglory.

And he put forth a parable to those which were bidden, when he marked how they chose out the chief rooms; saying unto them, When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted (Luke 14:7–11).

It is not wrong to want an exalted office. That is the purpose for which we were all created. But God wants those future Kings and Priests to have real character. To train us to develop that character, He requires us to learn humility, patience, and to become willing to give ourselves wholly toward that unfeigned service of others. It is only those who are willing to abase themselves in this life who will be offered great glory in God's Family.

The Crux of Our Challenge

We can all nod our heads and agree philosophically that we need to put God first and seek only His favor—not man's—but in reality, that is one of the very hardest principles for any of us ever to put into practice. Why? Once again, those carnal natures within us drive us strongly to seek the approbation of other human beings in the here and now. That insatiable pull is so much a part of us, we often do not even recognize its influence in our daily behaviors.

When we are harmed by someone else, it is not our natural response to take it lying down. When we are wronged, we want restitution, vindication, and justice. What is so bad about that? If you are robbed, why is it bad to want your rightful possession back, and for the guilty party to come under justice? That certainly is not wrong. But part of God's mandate for true Christians happens to be a requirement to be willing to suffer wrongs in the present, and to wait patiently for God's ultimate justice at a later time.

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord (Romans 12:19).

God intends to bring justice to all cases of wrong. No one will escape accountability for unrepentant acts of disobedience. But God specifically commands us not to demand immediate justice, but learn to *suffer* for righteousness' sake.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you (Matthew 5:10–12).

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: . . . (Matthew 5:43–45).

God has allowed many of His faithful servants to suffer at the hands of evildoers. Many of them never saw justice in their own lifetimes. They died never having been vindicated. Yet God is a Righteous Judge (2 Timothy 4:8). He is not slack to uphold His laws or the system for making the guilty accountable. But God—not man—determines the day of reckoning in each case. And one of the most challenging requirements for God's children is the willingness to suffer without demanding immediate vindication. It teaches us patience and tempers the metal of our spiritual characters to do so.

Reputation and Personal Image

What does this have to do with overcoming one's natural desire to find favor in the eyes of other human beings—vainglory? Much indeed. Many of our spiritual problems center on protecting our personal images. We wear our sense of *reputation* like a jewel of great value. Therefore, when someone says something or does something that we feel besmirches that reputation, we treat it *exactly* as if we have been robbed of valuable property. When someone insults us or shows disrespect, it assaults our own sense of self, and makes us worry how that act will affect our *image* in the eyes of others. What if others believe this slander? We have been wronged, and we want satisfaction!

But what is this *reputation* we cherish so much? It is nothing more than an *image* of the carnal, fleshly self! It is the persona we seek to project to other human beings to solicit approval, appreciation, and acceptance from them. Why do we value our reputations so much? Because reputation determines what other people think of us, and as we have already shown, human beings *lust* for the approval of others. Therefore, when reputation is tarnished and robbery has taken place, we demand restoration of that valuable property.

Who Is Harmed—You or Christ?

Now stop and think about the implications of these realities. How can defense of personal reputations have anything to do with the duties of true Christians? To answer that, ask first: What does it require to become a Christian? Does it not require submitting to the ordinance of baptism before one is added to the Body of Christ? And what are the emblems of baptism? The first one is the verbal acceptance of Jesus Christ as personal Savior, Lord and Master, High Priest in heaven, and soon-coming King. How do we confirm that legitimate acceptance of Him? By being submerged under the water completely in the symbolism of burial. What are we burying? The old self—the carnal, fleshly self of which we were born. It is an act of self-crucifixion, to symbolize our desire to put away concerns and cares for that old life, and to now commit to a totally new orientation of mind and purpose. We next receive the laying-on-of-hands by which God impregnates us with the earnest of His Spirit, giving us life as a new spiritual embryo. This new life is not the same as that old life we just killed. It is now *Jesus Christ living in us!* That is how a true Christian comes into being. Without submitting to that prescribed ordinance, there is no such thing as a Christian.

That being the case, when someone says something or does something hurtful to you, *being a Christian*, who is it hurting? Is it hurting Christ in you, or is it hurting the old self? As we have already noted above, it is the old—carnal—self that feels violated. It is that old self which smarts under the attack and cries out for justice. It certainly is not "Christ in you" which seeks vindication. Jesus Christ proved He was willing to suffer any injustice to fulfill His Father's will.

For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously (1 Peter 2:21–23).

Christ proved He did not demand immediate justice for wrongs against His Person. He was willing to wait patiently for the justice of His Father. His self-control was so unusual it made Pontius Pilate marvel:

And Jesus stood before the governor: and the governor asked him, saying, Art thou the King of the Jews? And Jesus said unto him, Thou sayest. And when he was accused of the chief priests and elders, he answered nothing. Then said Pilate unto him, Hearest thou not how many things they witness against thee? And he answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly (Matthew 27:11–14).

So when you have that overwhelming urge to demand justice and defend your good name, that is not "Christ in you," because Christ does not behave that way. It is none other than the old self still trying to maintain that personal reputation in the sight of other human beings. What else could it be?

If we are truly concerned only with what God thinks and not man, why does any personal effrontery upset us? We know God knows all things. If someone accuses us falsely, God is not fooled. He knows if we are innocent of the charge. He reads all hearts and minds. Why then do we lash out to defend ourselves so strongly? It is not because we need to convince God we are innocent. It is because we seek to convince *other human beings* we are innocent! Why do we do that? They are not our judges—only God is. It must be because the carnal mind is still working with all its might to cultivate and sustain that personal image and reputation. But if we have really crucified that old self, why are we still seeking to defend it and make it look so good to others? It is bona fide hypocrisy, and something each one of us must come to recognize in ourselves.

Next time you feel someone has slapped you in the face, besmirched your good name, or accused you falsely in some way, stop and consider your response very carefully. If you do what comes naturally and seek to make that party "pay" for his crime against you, you are only proving you are not really putting God first and acting as a true Christian. How will a true Christian respond to such abuse?

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain (Matthew 5:38–41).

This is the behavior of a true Christian, because this is how Jesus Christ Himself acted. Anyone who has that same Christ living within him will likewise manifest the very same fruits.

When Should We Care What People Think?

Is there ever an instance when we *should* consider the reactions of other human beings and allow it to affect what we choose to do? Of course there is. But such an instance has nothing to do with trying to make the self look better in the eyes of others. It has to do with serving others, under that outgoing way of "give." What is an example? God said, "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:22). That is a command, and it is one which requires us to think about how our words and actions might affect others. It tells us we must not only be "pure in heart" before God (who sees all things) but also careful about how our

actions may *appear* to other human beings. How does one avoid the *appearance* of evil, if one does not take into consideration how something might *look* to someone else?

This is exactly what the Apostle Paul was teaching concerning weak brethren.

As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. . . . Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse. But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak. For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend (1 Corinthians 8:4, 7–13).

Paul is here describing an instance when it would not be a technical violation of God's law to eat meat. It is good meat, and nothing is wrong with it just because it went through a pagan ritual before it wound up in the market to be sold. However, if a weak brother in the faith who has just come out of the pagan world still harbors superstitions about such meat, how should we respond? Should we say, "Well I know there is nothing wrong with it. I am innocent before God, and because I only care what God thinks and not man, your opinion of me won't affect what I choose to do." Paul said that would be a sin, not because the meat was unclean, but because we were selfish to ignore how our actions—even if proper—would negatively affect someone else.

Unfortunately, we have seen this type of indifference by some within the church in past years. The same one who brashly proclaims he does not care what anyone else thinks but God, is very vulnerable to this trap. Some seem to relish being figures of controversy. They claim to "say what they think," no matter what, and wear it like a badge of honor. To them, withholding what they really think is being hypocritical. You might recognize it in statements like, "I may not always be right, but at least I am honest and say what I think." These individuals consider those who guard their words and actions carefully as being hypocrites. They call it "being political." But by refusing to take others' weaknesses into consideration, it can very easily make one guilty of offending.

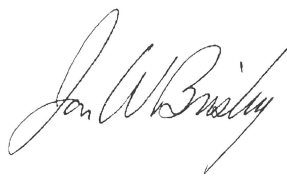
What if a brand new member of the church is still skittish about drinking any amount of alcohol because he grew up in a false church which ingrained in him that it is sin? Or what if he had a previous alcohol problem and is still subject to temptation? Even if you know God permits very moderate consumption of alcohol, would you insist on bringing out liquor during this man's visit to your home, ignoring his weakness? If you do not stop to evaluate how this man might respond to you, you will be guilty of violating a cardinal principle of God. This is a case where God requires you to be concerned with what another person thinks. But again, the concern is not for your own reputation, but for the spiritual well-being of a brother.

Therefore, what is our answer to the initial questions posed in this letter? How much do we care about what others think? How many of our personal decisions are made with strong consideration for how our actions make us appear in the eyes of others? Who are we really trying to please or impress? From whom are we seeking acceptance and approval?

If we are intent on fulfilling our Christian duty to walk in Christ's example, we will give up trying to enhance our personal images in the eyes of other human beings—vainglory. We will focus on seeking God's approval only, devoting ourselves to those pursuits which build treasure in heaven, not treasure on this earth. But at the same time, we will be very considerate of others, taking their weaknesses into account in what we say and do, as a service to those dear children of God.

If we make these our guiding principles, with the help of God's Spirit we will truly be able to avoid the traps of human selfishness and set an example that reflects the perfect character of Jesus Christ.

With love and respect in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Jon W. Brisby