

# **The Death of a Dream**

*Life After the ICOC*

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## **The Death of a Dream**

### **Introduction**

I'll never forget the first service I attended at the Mission Church of Christ<sup>1</sup>. Once the service started, the first thing I noticed was that all the people were taking notes. I had never seen people taking notes in church before, but as a college student I understood that taking notes was connected to learning. People at this church were serious about learning the Bible. They wanted to take the minister's words, study them out for themselves, and apply it to their lives. I was impressed. Then there was the friendliness. People were so welcoming and took an interest in me. One of the girls I met went to the same junior college I did and gave me a ride to school the next day. Just one service and I had already made a new friend. When I got home, I excitedly told my mom, "You can tell they're real Christians. They're so nice!" I didn't realize it at the time, but I had begun to catch a hold of the vision. There was more to follow.

Shortly after that first service, I went to a campus function with a group of students. I still remember climbing into a car full of enthusiastic, smiling young people. I was making new friends much more rapidly than I ever had before, and there was something different about these people. They were very moral, very friendly, and seemed to be committed to something special, something bigger than themselves. I soon learned the secret as I began to study the Bible with one of the students and a campus leader from the church. It became apparent very quickly that they were more than pew warmers. They were very serious about their Christianity. They revealed to me, in their studies, a plan for evangelizing the world through multiplication. If each Christian converted one person, the world would be won to Christ. Evangelism was a scary proposition for a shy person like me, but the idealistic side of me was hooked. I wanted my life to count for something, something important. Someone once said, "Life isn't worth living unless you have something worth dying for." I'd been struggling with feelings of emptiness for a while. I wanted to know why I was here. I knew there had to be something more than what I was experiencing in my life. I needed a reason for getting up every morning, and my new friends provided a reason.

After going through the church's study series over the period of a couple of months, I made the decision to dive in and was baptized. I was baptized in a Jacuzzi in front of a group of college students. Thus began the journey of a lifetime. I was now part of the kingdom of God, and my life was never going to be the same again. I learned a new lingo, phrases like "out of myself" and "discipling partner." Even familiar words like "kingdom" and "world" took on new meaning. It was like being part of a secret society. The ICOC filled up my life, if not my soul. I belonged. We were all a part of God's incredible kingdom and we were growing all over the world. When my husband and I moved from San Diego to Palm Springs we plugged right into the Desert Cities Church of Christ. We didn't have to feel alone in a new city where we had no family or friends. We gained an instant spiritual family. We all spoke the same language and had the same

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<sup>1</sup>The Mission Church of Christ was affiliated with the Crossroads Church of Christ discipling ministries. In 1988, the church underwent a Boston Church of Christ-led reconstruction and became known as The San Diego Church of Christ

purpose – to seek and save the lost. In the ICOC, it was comforting to know that there were disciples all over the world, and when we encountered disciples from another ICOC church, we formed a quick bond with them because we were all a part of the kingdom; we were all family. We didn't have to worry about finding things to do in our new home. Our time was filled with plenty of church and social activities.

So much of the confusion I had felt for much of my life went away when I joined the ICOC. The leaders laid out what our purpose was, how we were to live our daily lives as disciples of Jesus, and provided discipleship partners for friendship and accountability. The world made sense in the ICOC. I just had to make the daily decision to do what was right, according to the Word of God.

The sermons we heard at church frequently encouraged us to go for it, to dream dangerous dreams, to make an impact on the world. We heard sermons with titles like “No Quitters, No Crybabies, No Fear” and “The Power of the Decision.” Church leaders talked about having “life-changing quiet times.” It was addictive, but in time I discovered there were a lot of holes in the ICOC dream. The dream eventually died in my life. It had to.

### **“God Really Loves You”**

I went to church as a little girl with my family, but we stopped attending when I was in Elementary School. I've always believed in God and vaguely believed in Jesus, but it wasn't until I was in junior college, and just a few months shy of my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday that I began to seek God in earnest. My parents had returned to church. I would hear t.v. preachers talk about judgment, the end of the world, and the threat of nuclear war, and it produced an insecurity and fear in me. Ultimately, though, I believe it was the emptiness in my heart that led me on my search. I didn't know where I was going in life and wasn't sure what I believed. I was shy and didn't have many friends or date much, which, I think, contributed to my search as well. Friendships and dating are good things, but they can be misused in a futile attempt to fill our hearts. My lack of a social life made my emptiness glaringly obvious, and that isn't necessarily a bad thing. Where does one start on a search for God? Where do you find God? We're material beings living in a material world, and God is a spiritual being. Seeking to know the Creator can be an elusive and nebulous pursuit. So I started where a lot of people start: I searched for a church. I could have attended church with my parents, but I didn't want to. I don't remember why. Maybe I just wanted to do my own thing, like young people do. Maybe the Lutheran Church was too formal for my taste, or not young enough. Whatever the reason, I decided to find my own church. But I had an obstacle to overcome – I didn't have a car.

There are certain days in my memory that are so significant that I can remember them in detail. One of those days occurred at the end of summer in 1985. First, I need to give some background. Since I didn't have a car, I needed to find a church within walking distance of my house, and I wasn't aware of any churches close by. So I prayed. This may have been the first time in my life that I asked God to do something specific, my

first prayer of faith. I asked him for a church where the people took their relationship with him seriously, where there were a lot of young people like myself, and that was within walking distance of my house. A few days after I prayed, I went to the mall. It was a Saturday and I was wearing a white dress with a red belt (I told you this memory was so significant I could remember it in detail). As I was walking through the mall, a man walked toward me. The thought crossed my mind, "He's from a church." And sure enough, there he was, the answer to my prayer. "Excuse me," he began. He then made his sales pitch. A church where people are serious about God. Check. A church with a lot of young people. Check. A church within walking distance of my house...at first, it appeared that this was not the case, as he started to say, "We meet at Clairemont High School," then corrected himself, "Excuse me, we meet in Clairemont, at Madison High School." My old high school, the school I walked to everyday for three years. He gave me a church card. I showed up the next day. My life would never be the same.

I listened to a sermon by an ICOC evangelist the other day, and I walked away troubled in my spirit. I asked the Lord the following morning how he feels about the ICOC right now, and the scripture he put on my heart was Isaiah 10. You may not believe that the Lord answered my prayer by giving me this scripture, but that's okay. You don't have to believe it. I just ask that you proceed with an open mind. Isaiah 10 is a prophecy against Assyria, which had taken Israel into exile. God allowed the Israelites to be conquered and exiled because of their sin. In Isaiah 10:5-6 we read the following:

“Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my  
anger,  
in whose hand is the club of my wrath!  
I send him against a godless nation,  
I dispatch him against a people who  
anger me,  
to seize loot and snatch plunder,  
and to trample them down like mud in  
the streets.

Though these words were written for Assyria, I believe they're very applicable to the ICOC. There's much that can be gleaned from this, so I urge you to listen to these words and meditate upon them.

The one thing that really stands out to me in this passage is the sovereignty of God. He used the Assyrians to discipline the wayward Israelites. The Assyrians were not godly people who were seeking the Lord. They had their own designs, as we read in verse 7:

But this is not what he intends,  
this is not what he had in mind;  
his purpose is to destroy,  
to put an end to many nations.

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The Assyrians were full of pride. They were a tool in God's hands, but thought that they were acting independently.

When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, "I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes. For he says:

"By the strength of my hand I have done  
this,  
and by my wisdom, because I have  
understanding.  
I removed the boundaries of nations,  
I plundered their treasures;  
like a mighty one I subdued their  
kings.  
As one reaches into a nest,  
so my hand reached for the wealth of  
the nations;  
as men gather abandoned eggs,  
so I gathered all the countries;  
not one flapped a wing,  
or opened its mouth to chirp."

Isaiah 10:12-14

The king of Assyria is impressed with himself and all his conquests, but God reveals that the king has no cause for pride.

Does the ax raise itself above  
him who swings it,  
or the saw boast against him  
who uses it?  
As if a rod were to wield him  
who lifts it up,  
or a club brandish him who  
is not wood!

Isaiah 10:15

I believe that God put that particular scripture on my heart, but I don't believe he was answering the question I asked him. I believe he was answering the questions I didn't ask. Why did I join the ICOC? Where was God during those years? I prayed for a church and this is where I ended up. I don't believe it was a coincidence that that young man invited me to church that Saturday. I don't think it was a coincidence that my very specific prayer seemed to be answered in a very specific way. So, all these years later, knowing what I now know about the ICOC, the false, works-oriented gospel they preach, the deceitfulness of many of the leaders, the manipulative, abusive techniques that were

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used on me and many others, I'm left with that question lingering in the air – why? I can think of two possible answers. Either God answered my prayer and led me to the ICOC, or he allowed Satan to deceive me into believing God led me there. The first option is more palatable. Isaiah 10 has given me great insight into the reasons why I joined the ICOC, and why I stayed as long as I did. I want to share with you what I learned.

If a nation can be a tool in God's hand, then I believe a church can as well. I believe that God led me to the ICOC because he knew I wasn't yet at a place in my life to fully accept his love and grace. The ICOC was the tool God used in my life to bring me to a place where I could accept it. The law was a tutor for the Jews, leading them to Christ. The ICOC functioned in that way for me. I had to wear myself out trying to earn God's acceptance, and the acceptance of others before I would look up to heaven and plead for mercy.

Looking back, I can see the journey that God has led me on, into the ICOC, out of the ICOC, and now reaching out to those still in the ICOC. He knew when I first joined that I wouldn't accept his grace, but he still reached out to me. About a year after joining the ICOC, I was sitting on a bench at the San Diego State campus feeling discouraged. I felt like I couldn't live up to the discipleship standards I'd been taught, and that I was disappointing God. I felt like I was giving up inside. I walked down the hill below the library and sat on a bench in an area with little foot traffic. A stranger approached me and said, "I just feel like I need to tell you that God really loves you," and then he walked away. I've never doubted for a second that God sent that man to me. I was touched by what he said but it didn't change anything. Although I felt like something had died inside of me, I remained in the Mission Church of Christ for another two years. I left for four years, due to discouragement, then returned to the reconstructed San Diego Church of Christ. I remained in the ICOC for another ten years. For much of my time in the ICOC, I didn't feel close to God, but I still believe he was watching over me and had a plan for me. There were a handful of times when I really experienced the presence and filling of the Holy Spirit. That was rare though, and frustrating, because I didn't understand how it "worked." I couldn't control the Holy Spirit. I got a taste of what the Christian life was supposed to be like, but because I was pursuing my relationship with God if it were by works, it wasn't sustainable. But I believe God was giving me a gentle nudge, showing me what I was missing. I didn't understand it for several years, but the experiences stayed with me. In the months leading up to the Henry Kriete letter, I started to, for the first time, take a serious look at the teachings and practices of the ICOC and honestly consider the criticisms of the church's critics. It's so easy to dismiss all criticism as an attack of Satan, but keep in mind that truth can withstand scrutiny. If you're afraid to look at what the ICOC leadership has called "spiritual pornography," you might want to ask why. There may be doubts in your mind that you're trying to keep under wraps.

There was a key turning point that helped lead me out of the ICOC. I reached a point where I no longer cared about leadership position. I didn't care about being a Bible Talk leader. I didn't care what others in the ICOC thought. I just wanted to be close to God. Once my motives were purified, the scales fell from my eyes. It was a pretty dramatic

change in my thinking. The Kriete letter just confirmed a lot of the conclusions I'd already reached.

Leaving was not easy. It created a lot of emotional upheaval in my life. The road has been a bit rocky, but God has guided me every step of the way.

## **What is Your Reward?**

The other day, I looked up some old friends from my ICOC days on Facebook. It was odd seeing people that were once a major part of my world. My entire life revolved around the ICOC and these people were intertwined in all of it. All of our friends were in the ICOC. As I look at those familiar faces, I'm struck by how, after all these years, I don't know these men and women. Who are they? How are their children? Are they fulfilling their dreams? What has changed in their lives over the last eight years? We're no longer in touch. I haven't spoken to any of the bridesmaids from my wedding in several years. The ICOC was such an integral part of those relationships that severing ties with the ICOC inevitably severed ties with all of our friends as well. My husband has spoken to a few members over the years, on occasion, and has maintained a relationship with a few ex-members. We moved out of state several months after we left the church, so that contributed to the situation to some degree, but even before we moved, we knew that those relationships were changed permanently. The ICOC, in our day, was a very all-consuming, all-or-nothing, kind of place, a church that demanded unwavering loyalty, and friendships didn't tend to survive the upheaval.

It's amazing to me how I was so set adrift when I left the ICOC. I have these old pictures from some of the most meaningful times in my life, from most of my 20s and from the entire decade of my thirties, of people I haven't talked to in years. It's a lifetime ago, and here I am floating along, trying to find some grounding after all these years. We gave up a lot when we left the ICOC, but how much more would we have lost had we stayed? My relationship with God was damaged by false teaching and unbiblical, abusive practices. The Spirit of God was being quenched by a system created by men, and once I became aware of it, it became a conscience issue for me. Had I chosen security and friendship instead, I would have received the temporal rewards that come with that choice. What kind of reward is that?

This is what the Lord says:

“Cursed is the one who trusts in  
man,  
who depends on flesh for his  
strength  
and whose heart turns away  
from the Lord.  
He will be like a bush in the  
wastelands;  
he will not see prosperity



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when it comes.  
He will dwell in the parched  
places of the desert,  
in a salt land where no one  
lives.”  
Jeremiah 17:5-6

The underlying issue is idolatry. Anything that causes our hearts to turn away from the Lord is an idol. Note that the scripture is referring to our “hearts” turning away from the Lord. Can a person be attending church and engage in religious activities after his heart has turned away from the Lord? Let’s look at what Jesus has to say. He quotes Isaiah the prophet in Mt. 15:8-9:

“These people honor me with  
their lips,  
but their hearts are far from  
me.  
They worship me in vain;  
their teachings are but rules  
taught by men.’

According to Jesus, we can be fervent with our lips, while our hearts are not even close to God. The thought of that makes me shudder, because I’ve been there, and there’s a good chance you’ve been there too, and may even be there right now.

Look closely at the scripture Jesus quoted. One of the signs that we, as God’s people, have turned our hearts away from him, is the proliferation of rules. Why do men create rules? If you ask them, they’ll probably tell you they create rules to help people do what’s right. One example, from the ICOC, is in the area of dating. Now, nobody came up to us when we started dating in the ICOC and said, “We have dating rules that need to be followed, and here they are.” We learned, as we went along, through our discipling partners, that there were certain guidelines for disciples to follow. They weren’t called rules, but if we broke one of them, we would get corrected for it. So, in essence, they functioned as rules. There was certainly some flexibility, but for the most part, there were certain things we never, or very rarely, did. Brothers would cancel dates because they couldn’t get another brother to double date with. Why? Because the brother really loved to double date and knew the date wouldn’t be any fun as a solo date? Single disciples double-dated for the sake of purity. That “rule,” or “guideline” if you insist, was put in place by concerned leaders to protect the single disciples from sexual temptation. What’s wrong with that? Rules, no matter how well-intentioned, don’t have the power to change the human heart. Only Jesus can change the heart. Let’s go back to Jeremiah 17:5-6 for a moment. “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord...” Note what it’s saying here. What causes our hearts to turn away from the Lord? Trusting in man. Contrast this scripture with the one that follows:

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“But blessed is the man who  
    trusts in the Lord,  
    whose confidence is in him.  
He will be like a tree planted by  
    the water  
    that sends out its roots by the  
    stream.  
It does not fear when heat  
    comes;  
    its leaves are always green.  
It has no worries in a year of  
    drought  
    and never fails to bear fruit.”  
    Jeremiah 17:7-8

What a beautiful picture this paints of a lush, healthy tree. It's healthy because of where it's rooted. Whoever planted that tree was smart enough to plant it by the water so it would get the nourishment it needed in order to flourish. A tree planted by the water never fails to bear fruit. There's plenty of water so there's no need to worry about producing a crop.

Imagine you're that tree. What is going to cause you to grow and flourish and produce abundant fruit? A set of rules? A wise discipleship partner? A d-group? Plenty of friends to help you stay faithful? The first verse tells us the secret: “But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord.” It's vitally important where we place our trust. Jeremiah 17:5-6 reveals the reason: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord.”

There's a direct correlation between trusting in man and turning your heart away from the Lord. To put your trust in anything other than God is idolatry. Exodus 20:23 states: Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold. We know that God is not exclusively concerned with idols made of silver and gold. Isaiah 44 condemns wooden idols, and Colossians 3:5 notes that greed is idolatry, therefore, revealing a deeper definition of the word “idolatry” than what is found in the Old Testament. This is in line with the deeper meanings that Jesus revealed in the Old Testament laws, such as the definition of adultery. God is concerned with our hearts and, although we no longer physically bow down to idols made of silver or gold or wood, we are still guilty of putting people or things ahead of God in our hearts. This is a universal struggle and one that is very revealing in our lives if we're honest with ourselves. The history of the Jews as detailed in the Old Testament shows how prevalent the problem is in the human heart. The sin that got the Israelites in trouble again and again was idolatry. The nations around them all bowed down to idols, and the Israelites wanted to be like the other nations. We want to fit in and be accepted, and that drive is so powerful it can put a wedge between ourselves and God. It happened to the Jews in the Old Testament. It's happening today.

Note that in Exodus 20:23 God didn't tell Moses, "Do not make any gods to replace me." He said, "Do not make any gods to be **alongside** me." Do we, who are Christians, really believe that Jesus is enough, or do we feel the need to make gods to be alongside him? The god of rules? The god of discipling? The god of accountability? The god of commitment? Do we really believe that God's Holy Spirit, who lives within us, is capable of molding us and leading us, and preparing us for heaven? In Philippians 1:6, Paul told the Philippians that he was confident that "he who began a good work in [them would] carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Not the preacher, the best friend, the spouse, the discipleship partner, or the d-group. Christ Jesus is more than capable of getting his brothers and sisters to heaven.

## **On the Road to Freedom**

*I can't do this anymore. I don't understand. I don't want to blame you, but what am I to think? I'm trying to walk with you. I'm trying to be faithful, but I've got this gigantic wound inside my heart, an aching pain that I just don't know what to do with. I feel disconnected from you. I feel disconnected from others at church. I even feel disconnected from Joe. Why am I all alone? I don't understand it. Why don't you hear me? Why don't you answer? Why does this have to be so hard? I don't even know what to do. I don't know where to turn. If you won't answer me, I have no hope. What is it that has me shackled? Why is my soul not free and not at peace? It's like I'm inside a fog, and everywhere I turn, that's all I see. Everything is mired in confusion for me. I keep thinking about the song we sang Sunday: "I said I wasn't gonna talk about it, but I couldn't keep it to myself; no, I couldn't keep it to myself; I couldn't keep it to myself; said I wasn't gonna talk about it, but I couldn't keep it to myself what the Lord has done for me..." All this talk about singing and shouting: it makes me mad. I feel like the Holy Spirit is playing hide-and-seek with me. It's exhausting. I'm so tired of this. Jesus promised that I would never thirst or hunger if I came to him, but I'm hungry and I'm thirsty! I can't read these scriptures now because it feels like a cruel joke.*

The Lord answered the above cry from my soul by putting Psalm 118 on my heart. I didn't know what the Psalm was about until I read it.

In my anguish, I cried to the  
Lord,  
and he answered by setting  
me free.  
The Lord is with me, I will not  
be afraid.  
What can man do to me?  
The Lord is with me; he is my  
helper.  
I will look in triumph on my  
enemies.

It is better to take refuge in the

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Lord  
than to trust in man.  
It is better to take refuge in the  
Lord  
than to trust in princes.  
Psalm 118:5-9

*Jesus, You are my Lord. You're the capstone. You're the foundation of my faith and life. You bring hope and healing to my hurting soul. You are the gate, through whom I enter into righteousness. Praise your name forever.*

I'm learning to put my trust in the Lord and not in people, including myself. It's a journey that is often painful. When I put my trust in myself, I look for ways to cover the hurts in my heart so I don't have to experience the pain. When I put my trust in God, he reveals the pain that's buried in my heart so that I can be healed. I wasn't even aware of how much pain was in my heart until I made a decision to give my heart to God fully. It's easier to live a superficial life, but how much better is it to be close to the Lord and be freed from the past, from all the hurts that hinder you? How much better is it to let go, to forgive? To cry tears before God is a cleansing experience. I can no longer tolerate the shallow, empty way of life that I lived for so long. The pain that I'm experiencing is worth it. How much does buried pain hurt us emotionally and spiritually?

About six months after I left the ICOC, I started taking anxiety medication. I had built up anxiety that was overwhelming. That was as close to a total breakdown as I hope to ever have to experience. The medication helped me function and find some stability. I got some solid Biblical teaching about grace and settled into a new home, new job and new church. I slowly got to know new people and make some new friends. I made a decision two years ago to wean myself off the medication. I took it for five years and have now been free of it for two years. A lot of hurt and anger associated with my time spent in the ICOC was effectively buried while I was on medication. The pain is now able to emerge and I can surrender it to God and be healed. I share all this for a simple reason: over the years, I've heard current ICOC members chastise former members for hanging onto the past, telling them it's time to "move on." I can't speak for anyone else, but I can speak from my own experience. I haven't spent the last eight years full of anger and bitterness, obsessing about the ICOC. I've been living my life, moving ahead one step at a time. The pain I've been experiencing lately is healing; it's not healthy to have buried, unexpressed pain in your life. But I had to reach a point of stability, where it was healthy and safe to experience it. You can't set a timetable for emotional and spiritual recovery, and it doesn't necessarily happen in a straight line. People are individuals with complicated issues. It's likely that many people were drawn to the ICOC because of some kind of unmet need, or family hurt in their past. The ICOC has always had a one-size-fits-all mentality, even when it comes to healing from spiritual abuse. The Henry Kriete letter brought a lot of messy emotions to the surface. Once the cork was popped and all those emotions came pouring out, there was no way to get them back in the bottle. It may be inconvenient for some in the movement that people have expressed hurt and anger, and are no longer as compliant and trusting of leadership as they once were. But the

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emotional and spiritual meltdown that occurred was not Henry Kriete's fault. All he did was speak the truth. Some would have preferred that he had not told the truth, but they forget that God already knows the truth. He has a deep compassion for the oppressed, and the abuse that was so rampant throughout the movement couldn't continue forever.

The Lord is a refuge for the  
oppressed,  
a stronghold in times of  
trouble.  
Those who know your name  
will trust in you,  
for you, Lord, have never  
forsaken those who seek  
you.

Psalm 9:9-10

Kriete was only the messenger. ICOC leadership didn't like the message, though it was true, and attacked the messenger. Nor is it the fault of former members. When an abused person fingers the abuser, they're bringing the truth to light. This helps to protect other potential victims. Ephesians 5:11 says, "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them."

Those that mourn for the ICOC glory days fail to recognize that the ICOC was not giving glory to God in its "glory days." It was glorifying and promoting itself. That's why some people in the movement have looked for scapegoats to pin the ICOC's problems on: an unwillingness to admit the ungodliness and idolatry at the core of the movement. The ICOC doesn't need to do the same things they've done in the past, but in a tamer, nicer way. Idols need to be destroyed. If the ICOC is to survive, it's necessary to refute the false teaching and the idolatry handed down by Kip McKean. Kip's teaching is the elephant in the ICOC living room. If you're still teaching what Kip taught, you're still shackled to Kip McKean. If you don't want the abuses that came with the McKean system, you need to abandon the false, controlling, works-oriented teaching that lay at the heart of those abuses.

I don't want anyone to get the wrong impression. I bear responsibility for my decision to join the ICOC, and for my failure to really be a Berean. I was too quick to trust man; to trust his understanding of scripture; to trust his intentions; to trust his methods. And I was unwilling for several years to listen to anyone outside the movement. The ICOC met a need in my life and I was blind to what it was doing to me and to others. I'm accountable before God for both my actions and inactions. That's one reason why I wrote this paper. I refuse to sweep the past under the rug. George Santayana is the first person credited with the famous saying, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Have we learned from the past? What lessons have we learned? Here are some things I've learned.

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1. I've learned, and am still in the process of learning, to hear Jesus' voice for myself. I need no mediator between myself and Jesus. Jesus is himself the mediator between me and the Father.
2. I've learned to never again allow someone to control my actions in the name of Christianity. I will never again allow another person to take the place of the Holy Spirit in my life.
3. I will never again allow myself to be manipulated in the name of God. I get angry when I receive a Christian-oriented e-mail that instructs me to forward said e-mail to everyone I know if I'm "not ashamed of Jesus." Apparently, when Jesus told his disciples to not be ashamed of him and his words, he had e-mail in mind, or so you would think, judging by my inbox.

It's good to be free of the control, but it came at a high price. Have you thrown off the shackles of human control and manipulation? Are you afraid of the fallout if you chose to do that? Let us not forget that we answer to God, not to man.

## **Fatigue**

I'm sitting at my desk feeling fatigued. Not sleepy. Fatigued. It hasn't been a long week. It's only Tuesday. Fatigue is usually my body's way of telling me I'm under stress. I've been tired a lot since I went off of the anxiety medication. I can't remember the last time I really had physical energy. I experience emotional and spiritual energy, but my body is lagging behind. I spent a total of 13 years in the ICOC. I was baptized into the Mission Church of Christ in 1985. We underwent a reconstruction under the direction of the Boston Church of Christ in 1988. I never placed membership during that time and left early in 1989. I didn't really make a conscious decision to leave the first time. I was no longer on the membership roll and had moved back home. I lost contact with members and the church kept changing its meeting location. So I would show up for church and nobody would be there. And I had mysterious health problems that got in the way. The church held a conference in 1989 and I missed most of it due to severe fatigue. I thought I had a virus of some sort, but it lingered on well after the conference ended. I spent four years trying to get my life back on track and regain my energy. I worked part-time. I finished college and got my degree. I had given up on seeking a relationship with God. I felt discouraged by my inability to maintain the standards of discipleship that I'd been taught. I felt discouraged, depressed, and full of guilt. And tired. I kept a journal during my last months attending the church, and then continued to keep the journal for several years afterward. Here are a few entries from my last months in the church. This will give you an idea of how I was feeling.

9/8/88

*I can't believe how much homework I have to do by next week. Sometimes I think my teachers believe that we don't have other classes, not to mention jobs. I don't know where to begin. I just want to sleep. I didn't read my Bible today. Again! What a*

## ***The Death of a Dream***

*tremendously weak character I have; and such shallow convictions. I'm so controlled by my emotions. I hate it. I feel like my life is just headed nowhere fast. I feel extremely trapped; more and more hopeless everyday. God, please help me.*

*10/5/88*

*I feel like I could very easily leave this page blank. That's the kind of day it was. Here it is, 1:00 in the morning, technically 10-6, and I suddenly remember that I haven't written in my journal yet. The light was out and I was already in bed. I wish I was this diligent with my quiet times. They're so much more important. Why do I keep trying to live my life without God? It's so foolish. Where's my life going? I'm totally falling apart in school and I don't even resemble a disciple. Everything is just getting out of hand. I know Kurt was just trying to help tonight, and maybe he's right, but he doesn't understand my situation. I need to seek God with all my heart and battle for my soul. I don't want to kill myself doing homework when my heart isn't right with God.*

Here are a few journal entry snippets that I wrote three-and-a-half years later, shortly before I returned to the ICOC.

*5/6/92*

*I've been putting off writing in this journal for about a week now. I'm so tired of being sick. Just about the time I think I'm well, I get sick again.*

*5/11/92*

*Well, I'm going to try again. Why am I afraid of writing down my thoughts? My brain has been so active for the last few weeks. Somehow, it's harder to put it in print. I keep thinking I won't know where to start, or what to write. Of course, experience has taught me that once I start writing, it all comes to me. It all started with the anxiety attacks. I don't think I've ever had a more frightening experience, especially when I was in the emergency room. I feel so trapped now. The very thought of leaving the house makes me anxious. I don't know if it's going to happen again. I'm really vulnerable (I have a feeling this is going to be a very long entry). I've been a bundle of nerves since the incident at the hospital. He stood there and basically told me it was all in my head. And it makes sense to me, especially when I read through this journal. Dr. Del Carmen asked if I'd been feeling anxious. I told him I hadn't, and that made sense also. Until recently, I hadn't felt really anxious in quite awhile. But throughout this journal, I express fear, anxiety, depression and desperation. Feeling trapped is not a new sensation for me, but for three years, I felt mostly calm, but suffered a lot of physical ailments. I know our minds can make our bodies sick. Between my entry on 12-5-88 and my entry on 11-17-89, there was almost a year's gap. I first became ill in January of 1989, shortly after suffering a great deal of anxiety and depression. The spiritual problems and failures of the fall of '88' were never resolved. I didn't make a conscious decision to leave the church. As a matter of fact, I never thought it was possible that I would. Illness made it difficult for me to attend church functions, and I had moved back home as well. My*

## *The Death of a Dream*

*relationships with church members became non-existent. No one called and asked about me, which was probably for the best. Each person has to make their own decisions. But I made my decision by default. Indecision is, in itself, a decision; a decision to ignore something difficult, a decision not to make a decision, a cowardly evasion of questions with serious repercussions. By not making clear spiritual decisions, I put myself in a kind of stasis, kind of stopped living. I've been absolutely paralyzed for the last three years. It's time I dugged through all this stuff and made decisions about my life and future. I believe that the depression and anxiety were too much for me to bear, so I transferred the burden from my mind to my body. If you ignore potent spiritual issues, and attempt to stuff your fears and anxieties, they'll get you one way or another. They don't simply disappear.*

I had started having anxiety attacks and it turned my world upside down. To make a long story short, I came to the conclusion that I was having the attacks because I had left the church and walked away from God. I called an old roommate and started going through the First Principle studies again. In May of 1993, I was "rebaptized," having come to the conclusion that I hadn't truly become a Christian the first time.

I was in the ICOC for another ten years. I met my husband there, and we eventually left together, several months after the Henry Kriete letter was leaked. Six months after leaving the second time, I was in the emergency room and ended up on anxiety medication. I had started journaling again. You can see the stress build up in my life in this journal entry, written a couple of months before my trip to the emergency room.

2/2/04

*Man, I'm feeling rotten again. I'm afraid this anxiety will overtake me completely. I need to figure out why I'm feeling anxious so that I can pray about it. I think I'm going to take time out each evening to pray through a Psalm. Maybe that'll help me to connect with God. It just bothers me that I feel this bad. I want to be healthy and strong, to have more energy. My pulse feels a little fast, but my heart isn't racing. My pulse feels regular, like it isn't skipping. I think the problem is shallow breathing. That's one of the obvious signs of anxiety, and it leaves you feeling terrible. It's something I clearly need to pray about more.*

When I left the second time it was for different reasons and done with a completely different mindset. I left the first time thinking I didn't have what it took to be a disciple. I left the second time to get closer to God. After much study and discussion with leadership, my husband and I had decided that it was necessary for us to leave in order to be spiritually healthy. We joined a local Church of Christ, then moved to Tennessee, where we attended a Christian Church for many years. After moving to a different city in Tennessee, we're now happily involved in a Church of Christ about ten miles from our home.

The anxiety is much better. You may be thinking to yourself, "Both times she suffered from anxiety, it was after leaving the ICOC. Maybe she should pay attention to that." If



you're thinking that there's a connection between my struggles with anxiety and the ICOC, you would be right. I believe the first bout was largely a result of stuffing fears that I had lost my salvation and was headed to hell. The second time I left, I knew I wasn't leaving God, though I still had a lot of false teaching to unlearn. I was just starting on the path of grace. It was that false teaching, and the abusive practices that arose from it, that caused the anxiety that threatened to do me in. I was also in an unhealthy, stressful job situation, and that only added to the problem.

The dream had to end. It had to end because it was built on a system of man, rather than on Christ Jesus himself. We relied on our own strength to fulfill those dreams, rather than submitting to the Holy Spirit and asking him to lead us where he would like us to go. God has a purpose for each of our lives; a purpose that is a perfect fit. In the ICOC I always felt like a square peg being shoved into a round hole. You push that peg hard enough and pieces are going to break off and the peg is going to be damaged. I am that damaged peg. I spent years pursuing man-made goals in my own power. Hard work makes you physically tired. If you've ever moved, you know what I'm talking about. You find muscles you didn't know you had. Within reason, that kind of hard work isn't bad. But working hard to do things we aren't equipped to do wears us out emotionally and spiritually. We aren't capable of working hard enough or doing enough to please God. Deep down we know that and it makes us insecure and guilt-ridden, which leads to anxiety and depression.

The fatigue that results can cause our bodies to break down. All the anxious striving we engaged in to be acceptable to God is not only unscriptural, it's spiritually, emotionally, and physically unhealthy and damaging. The Father wants us to stop our striving and come home.

This is what the Sovereign Lord, the  
Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says:

“In repentance and rest is your  
salvation,  
in quietness and trust is  
your strength,  
but you would have none of  
it.  
You said, ‘No, we will flee on  
horses.’  
Therefore you will flee!  
You said, ‘We will ride off on  
swift horses.’  
Therefore your pursuer will  
be swift!  
Isaiah 30:15-16

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The Israelites were turning to the Egyptians for help against the Assyrians. God had determined that Israel would be taken into exile by the Assyrians for disciplinary purposes. Instead of submitting to the Lord's discipline and putting their trust in him, they were determined to proceed to Egypt and seek help from mortal man. I believe that the anxiety and fatigue I've suffered is a form of discipline; a reminder of what happens when I rely on man rather than God. God is my trust now. He gives me the strength daily to do what I need to do. He's my provider.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30

My purpose in writing this paper is to share the things God has taught me, and is continuing to teach me, since I left the ICOC. When I was a member, it seemed like those who left fell into a black hole somewhere. There were hushed warnings about the dire things that happen to those who leave. So I wanted to show that there is life, spiritual life, after the ICOC. My desire is to give glory to God and point the way to Jesus. Although I have plenty of criticisms of the ICOC and its teachings and practices, this paper is intended to be more pro-Jesus than anti-ICOC. I pray you will receive it in the way it was intended, and that you will be blessed by it.

## **Made to Worship**

As I write this, my soul is hungry to worship God. There is nothing better in the world than to praise the holy and sovereign Lord. My soul magnifies his glorious name. *Thank you, Father, for your priceless gift, for your love without measure, and for the inexpressible joy that fills my heart.* This is the real deal. Like I said before, the ICOC filled my life but it didn't fill my soul. There is a danger in filling ourselves with religious systems, human relationships, or good deeds. We, as human beings, long for something tangible to cling to. When it comes to our pursuit of God, we tend to look to religion in its various forms because it's something we can comprehend. Yet the Bible says that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and neither are our ways his ways (Isaiah 55:8). God's discourse with Job makes it abundantly clear that God is so far above us that he's difficult for our finite minds to comprehend. When I began my search for God, I was looking for someone to tell me the truth. Who is God and how do I have a relationship with him? How do I get to heaven? What does God want me to do in order to please him? I wanted somebody to help me understand the Bible so I could make practical application to my life. None of these are bad things. We all need help in life. But the problem comes when we miss the point, when we stop short of really knowing God, when we're satisfied with knowing about him, when we're satisfied with living a moral, Christian life without being connected to the source of life.

I once had a women's ministry leader who told a group of women, "We know how to be Christians." I was nearing the end of my association of the ICOC at the time, and that statement really made me think. There was a time when I would have nodded my head in agreement and not given it another thought. But that statement really encapsulates for me what went wrong with the ICOC, or perhaps what was wrong from the beginning. Christianity in the ICOC was mostly focused on what we do for God rather than on what he's done for us. Christianity is about a daily relationship, not a daily routine. I found the ICOC's approach comforting for many years because it was so tangible. It made me feel secure. Here's the formula, more or less, for being a Christian, as I was taught in the ICOC:

- Have a quiet time everyday.
- Share your faith everyday.
- Confess your sins to another person (preferably everyday).
- Study the Bible with non-Christians.
- Attend every church meeting.
- Give a tithe (off your gross income).
- Be involved in discipling relationships.

If we did these things consistently, we were considered faithful disciples. I don't think I ever did all of them as consistently as I was taught to do them, and I'm not sure others in the church had any more success. I've learned that Jesus has a better way.

## **What is worship?**

Have you ever asked the question, “What is worship?” It’s one of those biblical terms that get battled around but isn’t often defined. Here are some simple definitions that might help us out.

1. Honor and homage given to god or a sacred personage, or to any object regarded as sacred and 2. Adoration.<sup>2</sup>

The concept and practice of worship can get pretty deep, but as a starting point, I think both of these definitions are succinct and give us the basic idea. “Homage” is another one of those words we don’t often hear. Some synonyms for homage are “respect,” “reverence,” “deference,” “service,” “duty,” and “honor.”

What does worship look like? How do we know when someone is worshipping someone or something? Probably the first thing that comes to mind for many of us is the church service. Church services are often referred to as worship services. So if we wanted to arrive at a formula for how to worship, we could look at the elements of a church service and compile a worship list. We pray. We sing spiritual hymns and songs. For those of us who worship in a Restoration Movement church, the Lord’s Supper is a regular part of our worship service. Then there’s the preaching of the Word and the collection of contribution. So, according to my formula, if I want to worship God, I need to attend church, pray, sing, take communion, give a contribution and listen to a sermon. Oh, and fellowship with other believers. So now I’ve worshiped God? Well, perhaps, but I think we all probably realize that, while worship includes corporate worship, true worship goes well beyond that. In fact, a person can do everything on my list and not really be worshipping God at all. So let’s dig deeper.

Perhaps we can better understand what worship is about by looking at some of the actions and attitudes associated with worship. In Psalm 68:4 David tell us

“Sing to God, sing praise to his  
name,  
extol him who rides on the  
clouds –  
his name is the Lord –  
and rejoice before him.”

First, he mentions a specific action associated with worship, that of singing. The Psalms were songs that the Israelites sang to God. Many of them are still sung in Christian worship services. There are a couple of things to consider about worship songs. Not all songs with Christian content are worship songs. In the ICOC, we sang a number of songs that talked about all the hard work we were going to do for God. Those songs may have their place, but the focus of the lyrics is on the one singing, rather than on the one who

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<sup>2</sup> [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)

## *Made to Worship*

gave us the gift of song. A worship song is a song that has God as its focus. Another thing: a worship song is sung to God, not to other Christians. We were taught in the ICOC to look around at other disciples during the singing with a smile as a form of encouragement. Encouraging others is important, but not at the expense of worshiping God. He's the focus of our worship.

We're also told in this passage to sing praise to God's name. A worship song is a song that praises God for his attributes and mighty deeds. We're also told to rejoice before him. Worship is a joyful thing. Praising God makes us feel joyful in our souls. If we have been born from above and have God's Holy Spirit living within us, worship is a natural outpouring.

So, we are to sing praises to God with rejoicing, and we are to focus on him, not on what we're going to do for him, or about our commitment to him. Just praise him in song and forget for a moment about your response. I was so conditioned in the ICOC to focus excessively on my response to God and the cross that I didn't spend adequate time just worshiping and praising him. I think this was true in our corporate worship and it was definitely true in my own quiet times.

Let's now look at what Jesus had to say about worship. Jesus is speaking to a Samaritan woman and gets a little too personal for her comfort, so she decides to talk doctrine with him.

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

John 4:19-20

She seems to be making a reasonable point. God had given the Jews very specific commands on how to worship him properly, what sacrifices to offer, who was authorized to offer the sacrifices, and where the sacrifices could be offered, among other things. If we're serious about seeking a relationship with God, we want to know what he expects of us, what's acceptable and what isn't acceptable. Under the Old Covenant, there was a very specific list of what was acceptable and what was unacceptable to God, both in worship and in daily living. The law covered every area of their lives. Are God's expectations different under the New Covenant? Are there specific authorized ways in which we're to worship? Jesus' response to the woman goes beyond the written law and gets to the heart of the matter, as was typical of Jesus.

Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

John 4:21-24

Jesus is telling this woman that something has radically shifted. He brought a new reality to the worship of God. Because of his death on the cross on our behalf, and his resurrection from the dead, we now have access to the Father of our spirits. In Romans 6, Paul tells us what took place when we were baptized into Christ.

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Romans 6:4-11

What is the first thing you think of when you read these passages? For a long time, Romans 6 was about two things, in my mind: baptism and death to sin. But it's about much more than that. These passages show us why the gospel is good news. The ICOC emphasized sin in their teaching to such a degree that I couldn't see the good news in these passages. I would hone in immediately on the word "sin," think about all the sins I'd committed that week and feel guilty because, according to Romans, I'm now dead to sin, but I knew, painfully well, that I still struggled with sin. Romans 6 told me I was a failure. I was looking at it through an ICOC lens that focused excessively on sin rather than the one who died to release us from the power of sin! I was looking at it through a guilt and condemnation lens rather than a grace and faith lens. Romans 8:1 says there is NO condemnation for those who are in Christ, but I couldn't quite bring myself to believe it because it conflicted with so much of what I was hearing at church and in d-groups.

What does this have to do with the subject of worship? We worship a good God. We worship a merciful, compassionate God who loves us deeply and wants to hear from us. A couple of scriptures that help me to grasp this are found in Ephesians and 1 John. Ephesians 1:7-8 says:

In him, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

1 John 3:1 says:

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should

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be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

The Father has lavished his love upon us by giving his Son. Knowing the Biblical Jesus is a vital part of our worship.

## *The Touchstone*

A touchstone was a black siliceous stone that was formerly used to test the purity of gold and silver by the color of the streak produced on it by rubbing it with either metal.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is a touchstone. We need to look to him to determine the purity of our faith and worship. We're told in Hebrews 12 to fix our eyes on Jesus. Let's take a deeper look.

## **All Glory to the Lamb that was Slain**

How do we fix our eyes on Jesus? I've always had difficulty with this sort of thing. We have Hollywood images in our heads of what Jesus looked like, which are undoubtedly inaccurate. We read about the things that Jesus taught and did and try to picture ourselves there. I've tried to visualize his death on the cross, and everything surrounding it, during the Lord's Supper, in an attempt to feel some deep emotion. But I find it elusive. We're separated by 2,000 years, but Jesus is still very much alive. He's at the right hand of the Father in heaven and dwells in our hearts through faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). But the conflict that we experience between the physical and the spiritual realms make it difficult to grasp this.

How do we know when our eyes are fixed on Jesus? I want to start out by looking at a scripture that you probably won't expect. It's found in Deuteronomy 16. There are three annual feasts described in this chapter. These were the feasts that all men in Israel were required to attend. They are a shadow of what was to come.

### **1. The Passover Feast**

In verses 1-8 the Lord commands the Israelites to celebrate the Passover on a yearly basis, on the anniversary of their exodus from Egypt. God didn't want his people to forget that he had rescued them from slavery with a mighty hand, so he instituted a yearly celebration. They were to make an animal sacrifice and eat unleavened bread for seven days. They were recreating the original Passover in this way.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul is chastising the Corinthian church for tolerating sexual immorality, and he makes an interesting point.

Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works

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<sup>3</sup> [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)

through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast – as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

1 Corinthians 5:6-8

The Corinthians were acting like people who were still under the curse of the law. Paul reminds them that they've been set free from sin through the sacrifice of Christ, and they need to act like it. Just as God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, Jesus has set us free from sin through the sacrifice of his own body. We celebrate that sacrifice during the Lord's Supper, and our lives should reflect the reality of that sacrifice. Jesus' death and resurrection is at the heart of our faith and our lives should be a beacon, lighting the way to the cross. His sacrifice is the only sacrifice that sets us free, yet we can easily get caught up in thinking that our own sacrificial lifestyle is what will rescue us from condemnation. I recently listened to a an ICOC sermon entitled "Attaining to Eternal Life." In the sermon, the evangelist reminded his audience of a time when they really lived sacrificially; he asked them if radical sacrifice was only for the younger people, and commended a particular marrieds ministry for really cranking. Is it wrong to live a sacrificial life? It depends on what's motivating the sacrifice. I remember the old days in the ICOC, the days that this man is referring to. I don't know what all the motivations were behind the "radical" things that were being done. It probably varied from person to person. I do know, however, that such a lifestyle was expected for a "totally committed" disciple and a great deal of manipulation and coercion was applied to get people to comply with the expected standards. Although there were probably some sincere motives to serve God, in a coercive, manipulative, guilt-inducing environment, you can be sure there were plenty of impure, insincere motives as well. Our sacrifices, in and of themselves, are of no value. They're absolutely meaningless unless they're motivated by faith in Christ, as a response to his sacrifice for us. And that leads me to mention an important point.

I read an article several years ago by John Engler, on his Barnabas Ministry website. I don't remember the name of the article, but I do remember what it was about. It was an "aha" moment for me. He talked about the difference between commitment and submission. I really appreciate his insight into this subject. It made an impact on my life.

Commitment draws attention to self. "I'm really committed. Look at the things I'm doing. It proves how committed I am." Submission draws attention to the one being submitted to. Some of the external actions may be the same, but the focus tends to be very different. Look at the life of the Apostle Paul. Aside from Jesus himself, I can't think of anyone in the New Testament who lived a more sacrificial life than Paul. Yet, he continually brought attention to Jesus, not to himself. Here are a few examples from his letters.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.



Romans 1:1

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

1 Corinthians 2:1-2

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

Philippians 3:7-9

I eagerly expect and hope that I will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Philippians 1:20-21

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Galatians 6:14

The more completely we submit ourselves to Jesus as Lord and let his Spirit lead us, the more sacrificial our lives will become. But we won't draw attention to ourselves, but to Christ.

## **2. The Feast of Weeks**

This feast was observed seven weeks from the second day of Passover. It is also known as Pentecost, and was the feast that was being celebrated in Acts 2. It was celebrated when the first fruits of the wheat harvest was gathered and offered to the Lord. It also commemorated the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. This was the only feast in which leavened bread was used, which was unusual because leavened bread symbolized impurity to the Jews.

Just as the giving of the law to Moses was commemorated during the Feast of Weeks, so the beginning of the Church began during this feast. God gave Moses the law written on stone; he gave his Church the Holy Spirit, so that the law would be written in our hearts (2 Corinthians 3:3). God gave Moses the ministry that brought death; in Christ, God has

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<sup>4</sup> ww3.telus.net

given us the ministry of the Spirit, which brings life (2 Corinthians 3:7). The law condemned; the ministry of the Spirit brings righteousness (2 Corinthians 3:9). God gave Moses the law at Mount Sinai and established a covenant with his people. Acts 2 records the establishment of a new covenant, written in Jesus' blood.

Are you living the life of a New Covenant Christian, or are you grounded in Old Covenant thinking? Look at the words and phrases used in the New Testament to describe the law and its effect on those who lived under it.

- Powerless (Romans 8:3)
- Curse (Galatians 3:13)
- Obligation to perfect obedience (Galatians 5:3)
- Alienation from grace (Galatians 5:4)
- Shadow (Hebrews 10:1)
- Slave (Galatians 4:7)

Here are some of the words and phrases used to describe the New Covenant.

- Life (2 Corinthians 3:6)
- Freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17)
- Ever-increasing glory (2 Corinthians 3:18)
- No condemnation (Romans 8:1)
- Life and peace (Romans 8:6)

Which of these lists best describes your life? In my experience, the ICOC blurs the line between Old and New Covenant. They don't trust grace to be a sufficient motivation in the life of a Christian, so they multiply rules, or guidelines, or direction. Call it whatever you wish, but they love external measures by which to judge the faithfulness of their members. The life that is focused on Christ is a Spirit-led, New Covenant life. The law functioned as a tutor to the Jews, leading the way to Christ. They were unable to please God through obedience to rules. So are we. If you think you can please God through law, any law, your focus on Jesus will be blurry.

### **3. The Feast of Tabernacles**

The Feast of Tabernacles, or Feast of Booths, is held five days after the Day of Atonement. The Jews construct booths to remind them of the temporary housing of their forefathers when they wandered in the desert.

Just as the Passover Feast was a shadow of Jesus' crucifixion and the Feast of Weeks was a shadow of the establishment of the New Covenant and the church, the Feast of Tabernacles is a shadow of the Messiah coming in his Kingdom.

There are two interesting features of the Feast of Tabernacles that distinguish it from the other feasts. During the celebration in Israel, the temple was illuminated by the lighting of huge menorahs. Secondly, a vessel of water was poured into a basin located at the base

of the altar. First the golden vessel of water was filled at the pool of Sloam and taken to the altar. Next, another golden vessel would be filled with wine and they both would be poured together into the basin. This symbolized prayer for Fall rains upon which the nation of Israel was dependent. Second, it pictured the coming of the Messiah and His Kingdom in which the Holy Spirit would be poured on Israel and believers of all nations. The last day of the feast was the “Day of the Great Hosannan.” This means “save now” and became “Hosanna,” looking forward to the coming of the Messiah.<sup>5</sup>

In John 7, we read of Jesus attending the Feast of Tabernacles. In John 7:37-38, we read the following:

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”

The Jews could not have missed the point Jesus was making. They invoked God’s blessing during the Feast for rain to water their crops and provide them with sustenance. Jesus is telling them, and us, that he’s our source of life and sustenance. In him, we’ll never hunger or thirst spiritually.

As I mentioned earlier, it was customary to light large menorahs during the Feast. The day after the Feast ended, Jesus tells the people:

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

John 8:12

The light and water were symbols, mere shadows of what was to come. Jesus is the reality. He not only provides us with spiritual sustenance, but with spiritual enlightenment and direction.

## **Light of the World**

*You and I were made to worship  
You and I were called to love  
You and I are forgiven and free  
When you and I embrace surrender  
When you and I choose to believe  
Then you and I will see  
What we were meant to be*

*“Made to Worship,” Chris Tomlin, Ed Cash, and Stephan Sharp*

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<sup>5</sup> [www.bible-truth.org](http://www.bible-truth.org)

When I was in the ICOC we had a study series that we used with people in our evangelistic outreach. One of the studies in the series was called **Light and Darkness**. The study revealed how sin has separated us from God, and from the light of his presence, establishing the need for a savior. The Bible has much to say about spiritual light and darkness. One of the key passages on this topic is in 1 John:

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

1 John 1:5-10

Take a look at verse 5. God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. To walk in the light is to have fellowship with God and with other Christians. Sin brought darkness; Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, when appropriated by faith, cleanses us of sin, removes us from the kingdom of darkness, and places us in the kingdom of light (Ephesians 5:8). Those outside of Christ live in the darkness; those who are in Christ are in the light, by God's wonderful grace. What does that look like? In considering this question, it might be helpful to look back at the Old Testament. Let's see what it was like to live under the Old Covenant, to see if this will, if you'll pardon the pun, shed some light on this topic.

Psalm 78 gives a concise and revealing history of the Jews from the time of the Exodus to the time of David's kingdom. Look at the faithfulness of God toward his people and the powerful miracles he performed:

- He sent the ten plagues on the land of Egypt, including the Passover (v. 43-51)
- He parted the Red Sea (v. 13)
- He guided them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (v. 14)
- He split rocks in the desert and provided them with water (v. 15)
- He gave them manna from heaven (v. 24)
- He rained down quail from heaven (v. 27)
- As he led them out of Egypt he protected them along the way and drove out other nations before them (v. 52-55)
- He established very detailed laws for the people to follow (v. 5)
- He allotted lands to them as an inheritance (v. 55)
- He was merciful to them, forgiving their iniquities again and again (v. 38)

Have you ever wondered what it would have been like to see God perform great miracles? To witness the Passover and the parting of the Red Sea? How easy would it be to obey God and love him if you witnessed his power and tender care in such an unmistakable way? How easy was it for the Israelites? Here's a synopsis, again from Psalm 78, of their response to the faithfulness and power of God:

- They were armed with bows, yet they turned back on the day of battle (v. 9)
- They forgot what God had done for them, including his miracles (v. 11)
- They continued to sin against him, despite his miracles (v. 17)
- They willfully put God to the test by demanding that he provide food (v. 18)
- They spoke against him (v. 19)
- They did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance (v. 22)
- They continued sinning even after he disciplined them, in spite of his wonders (v. 32)
- They would seek him when he brought discipline upon them, but then flattered him with lying tongues. (v. 36)
- Their hearts were not loyal to him, and they weren't faithful to his covenant (v. 37)
- They rebelled against him **often** in the desert (v. 40)
- They put him to the test again and again (v. 41)
- They did not remember his power or the redemption he gave them from their oppressor (v. 42)
- They were disloyal, faithless, and unreliable, like their fathers before them (v. 57)
- They turned to idols and aroused God's jealousy (v. 58)

It's easy for us to think that this was an exceptionally wicked generation, an anomaly; that if we had been there, we would not have rebelled the way they did, after seeing God's power displayed in such an awesome fashion. However, these were not the only miracles performed by God in Israel's history, and this was not the only generation to witness his power. He gave them miraculous victories over enemies that were stronger than they were. We're all familiar with David and Goliath, Samson's supernatural strength, the walls of Jericho falling, etc. But were the generations after the Exodus any more faithful? Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and the books of the Kings (1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles) paint a pretty ugly picture. The heart of Israel toward their God and his statutes did not improve. They, in fact, slid deeper and deeper into idolatry and all its attendant sins. By the time Josiah became king of Judah in the divided kingdom, the people no longer knew God's law. The Book of the Law had been lost and was discovered in the temple by the high priest. So, if Moses' generation didn't hold the patent on rebellion, maybe we should take a look at God. Is there anything else he could have done to make them believe in him, love him, and obey him? A few more miracles? Did he not provide well enough? Did he not give them enough direction? Maybe they needed more laws; maybe they needed to be disciplined, form d-groups, be more accountable to one another.

I'm obviously being facetious, but it's to make a point. Law doesn't have the power to make a person love and obey God. Even miracles, in and of themselves, can't make

someone love and obey God. There's a desperate sickness in the human heart that can't be cured by rules, by deeds, by commitment, by morality, or by accountability. This is what the Bible refers to as darkness. We need to be rescued from the slavery of darkness, just as God rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites didn't have the power to rescue themselves from Pharaoh; neither do any of us have the power to rescue ourselves from the power of darkness. The only power that can rescue a person from darkness is the power in Jesus' blood. Jesus, the sacrificial lamb that was slain for the sins of the whole world. He's the Passover lamb that sets us free spiritually. Being set free physically didn't set the Israelites free spiritually. God's miracles didn't set them free spiritually. God's law didn't set them free spiritually. True spiritual freedom ONLY comes from one source: Jesus Christ.

Right about now, you may be saying, "Tell me something I don't already know. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Nobody comes to the Father but by him. I know this already." Knowing a truth of scripture is not the same thing as living out that truth. When I was in the ICOC, there was a disconnect between my head knowledge and my heart's true beliefs regarding myself, God, and sin. I would read certain passages, know they were true, but my heart wasn't getting it. When you hear a familiar passage don't be too quick to say, "I've read that scripture 100 times." Are your head and heart really in agreement? Is there any contradiction between what you read in scripture and what you're hearing from the pulpit, or in your d-group?

In John 8:12, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Psalm 119:105 tells us the following:

Your word is a lamp to my feet  
and a light for my path.

Let's take a look at John 1:15 and see how the above two passages work together in harmony.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

Jesus is the living word who enlightens our hearts and lights our paths. He removes spiritual darkness and confusion. Sometimes we think we'll attain spiritual understanding simply by reading the Bible a lot. Jesus had an interesting conversation with the Pharisees about the connection between Scripture and salvation. It's found in John 5:39-40.

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them

you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me,  
yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

Spiritual life doesn't come from perfect understanding of Scripture, of getting all your doctrine straight, of getting everything right. Spiritual life comes when we recognize that we're in the darkness and that only Jesus can bring us into the light. We aren't saved by Scripture; we're saved by Jesus.

The reason I experienced such a discrepancy between my heart and my head for so long was that I wasn't looking to, and trusting in, Jesus to light the way. The scriptures pointed the way to Jesus, but the ICOC leaders were pointing me to the ICOC and its discipling system. They camped out on the scriptures that served their purposes, but neglected the scriptures that didn't fit into their plan. On the occasions that they would use those scriptures, they didn't find a place in my heart, because at least 90 percent of what I was being taught had to do with works and discipleship, and was only peripherally about Jesus.

I now realize that Jesus is my light and my life. He's the one that gives life, and that life, according to John 1:4, is the light of men. I learned that scriptural knowledge alone would not bring enlightenment. Scriptural knowledge plus good deeds didn't bring enlightenment. Scriptural knowledge leads us to Jesus, and he alone gives light and life. I will now only follow Jesus. I will only follow the lead of spiritual leaders who are leading me to Jesus as the source of life.

### **What Well are you Drinking from?**

*Lord, where are you? I feel like I'm in the middle of an arid desert and the heat is beating down on me, sapping me of strength. It takes everything I've got just to persevere. Why do you hide yourself from me? What have I done to be mired in this dull emptiness?*

I love you, O Lord, my  
strength.

The Lord is my rock, my  
fortress and my deliverer;  
my God is my rock, in whom I  
take refuge.

He is my shield and the horn  
of my salvation, my  
stronghold.

I call to the Lord, who is worthy  
of praise,  
and I am saved from my  
enemies.

Psalm 18:1-3

*Made to Worship*

*Lord, I cry out to you to rescue me from this body of death. If you don't answer me, I'll fade away to nothingness. Without you, I'm helpless, an empty shell.*

Whom have I in heaven but  
    you?  
And earth has nothing I desire  
    besides you.  
My flesh and my heart may  
    fail,  
but God is the strength of my  
    heart  
and my portion forever.  
                                Psalm 73:25-26

Wait for the Lord;  
    be strong and take heart  
    and wait for the Lord.  
                                Psalm 27:14

*Lord, it's hard to wait. I feel confused. The world doesn't make sense lately. I want to do your will, but lack the power to do it. Strengthen me, fill me, come to rescue me. I can do nothing on my own power.*

As the deer pants for streams of  
    water,  
so my soul pants for you,  
    O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the  
    living God.  
When can I go and meet  
    with God?

I say to God my Rock,  
    “Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I go about mourning,  
    oppressed by the enemy?”  
My bones suffer mortal agony  
    as my foes taunt me,  
saying to me all day long,  
    “Where is your God?”

Why are you downcast, O my  
    soul?  
Why so disturbed within me?  
Put your hope in God,  
    for I will yet praise him,



my savior and my God.

Psalm 42:1-2; 9-11

Have you ever felt like this? Do you ever feel like you're stumbling around in the dark, trying to find the light switch? You search your heart for unconfessed sin and find nothing. You pray for understanding and there's silence on the other end. I've been feeling like that lately, and I want to share some scriptures the Lord put on my heart that will hopefully help all of us when we go through the "desert times."

Jesus understands the ache of the human soul. He understands that we were made for fellowship, for intimate communion with him. This is what our souls cry out for. He gave a promise to a Samaritan woman that applies to us as well. The story is found in John 4. Jesus is traveling through Samaria and sits down by a well to rest, when a woman comes to fill her water jar. We'll pick up the story in verse 7.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink? (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

John 4:7-10

One of the things that I find encouraging about this story is Jesus' eagerness and willingness to give people the fulfillment that they crave; even a despised Samaritan woman. Let's pick up the story in verse 11.

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

John 4:11-14

Up to this point, the woman is still thinking in literal terms. Drawing water out of the well is one of those exhausting, neverending tasks she has to deal with on a daily basis. If Jesus has a way to lessen the burden of her daily grind, she's all for it. But aren't we all like this woman? We get caught up in the daily activities of life and have a difficult time

seeing beyond the physical. Jesus is offering her something far greater than an easier way to draw water, yet her view is blocked. He's about to clear that view.

He told her, "Go, call you husband and come back."

"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

John 4:16-17

Jesus reveals the woman's past, something he couldn't have done if he were an ordinary man. How do you suppose she felt about her life? Guilty? Ashamed? Like a failure? Hopeless? It's interesting that after five husbands she's now living with a man outside of marriage, or, at the very least, is physically intimate with him. Do you suppose all those failed marriages caused her to feel jaded? Marriage hadn't worked out for her, but she still had unfulfilled needs in her life, so she continues to do what she has always done – look for a relationship with a man for fulfillment. He wouldn't even marry her, so it's possible she wasn't gaining materially from the relationship, but pursues it anyway.

Do you have anything in your life, a relationship, a habit, a hobby, or even religious activities, that you habitually look to in an attempt to fill the empty places in your heart? I did, for many years. God is teaching me a better way now. He would have shown me the way earlier if I had been willing.

So how does the woman react to Jesus' disclosure?

"Sir," the woman said. "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

John 4:19-20

It's easy to see what this woman was doing here, and it's easy to understand why, because we've done it ourselves, haven't we? We would much rather keep life on a superficial level so we don't have to feel the pain inside our hearts. The pain of emptiness, loneliness, guilt, rejection. Jesus is offering a solution to this woman's pain, but she's resisting him. Since she hasn't been successful in relationships, maybe religion is the answer. So she seeks knowledge from Jesus on proper worship. If anyone would know, it's him. But Jesus is still trying to dig deeper, to get into her heart.

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father

in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.  
God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming.  
When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

Then Jesus declared, “I who speak to you am he.”  
John 4:21-26

For all the superficial fronts this woman puts up, Jesus sees through it. He doesn’t speak to her in parables, like he did to the crowds. He told his disciples, in Matthew 13: 11-15 that he spoke to the crowd in parables so that

“Though seeing, they do not  
see;  
though hearing, they do not  
hear or understand...

For this people’s heart has  
become calloused;  
they hardly hear with their  
ears,  
and they have closed their  
eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with  
their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts  
and turn, and I would heal  
them.

Matthew 13:13,15

The crowds didn’t have ears to hear Jesus. The woman at the well did. She was thirsty and he offered her living water to quench her thirst. She knew all too well that she wasn’t a spiritual person. She was painfully aware of her sins and failures. She knew she didn’t have the answers and was open to Jesus.

It’s the same with us. We search for meaning and fulfillment in all sorts of places. We engage in an endless variety of pursuits, mental and physical, in order to feel whole and to attain peace. As Christians, we know that Jesus is the answer, but we often don’t trust that in our hearts. We think that relationships, vacations, money, or even religious activities can fill the hole in our soul. Solomon pursued meaning in life in more ways than any of us will ever have at our disposal. He had numerous wives and concubines, an elaborate house, vineyards, respect, money, and wisdom. If anyone ever “had it all,” it was Solomon, yet he discovered that it was all meaningless, a “chasing after the wind.”

## *Made to Worship*

You may have read Ecclesiastes, maybe more than once, but have you learned in your life what Solomon learned in his? It's a lesson some people never learn. It takes honesty and courage to admit to ourselves that there is nothing we own, nothing we can do, nothing within ourselves that can satisfy the soul. It's a humbling and unnerving admission. It strips away all of our pretense. We stand spiritually naked in a dark, cold, confusing world and it's scary. And it's necessary to truly trust in God.

## *Worldly distractions*

Maybe you're not there yet. Let's look at some of the things that hold us back from truly pursuing intimacy with Christ.

1 John 2 gives us three examples of things that hold us back.

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

1 John 2:15-17

Man was made to worship – to adore, to venerate, to serve, to give of our whole beings. We were made to worship God, but if we don't worship him, we'll worship something or someone else. Ephesians 2:1-3 gives us some clarity on what John is referring to when he speaks of "the world."

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature, and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

There is a world system that is under the control of Satan, with values that are contrary to God's law. When we follow the ways of the world, we're following Satan, who is the ruler of this world. 1 John 2 lists three categories of worldliness that we are not to love.

### **1. The cravings of sinful man**

All of us inherited a sinful nature from Adam, also known in the Bible as the flesh. Romans 6 teaches that when we're baptized into Christ, the sinful nature is rendered powerless, and Christ now lives his life through us. We're no longer powerless to resist the temptations of the flesh, but we're still tempted.

The ICOC has always placed a huge emphasis on the need to overcome sin. But their focus is on the wrong thing. They focus on the sin and teach confession to other people and human accountability as an antidote. Anything that takes our focus off of Jesus is the wrong solution. The book of Titus has an interesting passage that I think will add to this discussion.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Titus 2:11-14

Do you see the solution that God offers us? We now have the power to say “no” to sin, and the motivation to say “no” comes from God’s amazing grace. We’re not to focus on the sin itself in order to overcome it. We’re to focus on Jesus, the one who has already overcome. Look at verse 14. When we look to Jesus and live in him, we not only have the motivation to not sin, we’re eager to do good. We have a new nature in Christ. We have the Holy Spirit within us, transforming us into Christ’s image more and more, and as we become more like Christ, we desire to do good more and more, and have a decreasing desire to sin. But Jesus is the solution, not willpower, not accountability, not a long quiet time. We get the motivation and the power from the One who died for us and was raised from the dead. Resurrection power is at work in our lives! We need to take our eyes off of ourselves and fix them on Jesus.

## **2. The lust of the eyes**

This is a very relevant topic for those of us in America. Like the Laodiceans, we have wealth and, like them, we easily become complacent and trust in our material possessions. I think greed is one of the biggest challenges facing Christians in the U.S. It’s sobering to watch HGTV sometimes. You hear young couples talking about how they “need” a certain number of square feet, or about how a house isn’t move-in ready because the kitchen is ten-years old and needs updating. Watch t.v. commercials for awhile to see how prevalent this problem is. Advertisers go for the jugular, don’t they? You have to have this kind of car in order to keep up with the Joneses, or to be cool, or successful. You can’t really be happy until you buy this product. And, as a nation, we’ve fallen for it. Unfortunately, a lot of these possessions have been purchased on credit; people have taken on big mortgages that they can scarcely afford. With the downturn in the U.S. economy, we’ve seen the fallout of this materialistic lifestyle. Many people have been forced to lower their standard of living. As Christians, we need to be thoughtful about the way we live and the way we consume. Do we lust after possessions and money? Do we covet the nice house or car of our neighbor? Psalm 119:37 asks God to turn our eyes away from worthless things. That’s a worthwhile prayer.

So how do we overcome the lust of our eyes? By fixing them on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2) and storing up treasure in heaven (Matthew 6:19-21), where we're seated with Christ (Ephesians 2:6). We're to set our hearts on things above, not on earthly things (Colossians 3:2). The things of this earth perish with use. We have an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade (1 Peter 1:4)

### **3. Boasting of what we have and do**

1 Corinthians 13 tells us that love does not boast. If it does boast, it boasts in Jesus alone (1 Corinthians 1:31; Galatians 6:14). When we really understand God's grace we realize we have no cause to boast (Ephesians 2:8-9). Grace is a gift we don't deserve and cannot earn. Ephesians 2:10 tells us that we were created in Christ Jesus to do good works that God created in advance for us to do. It's all about Jesus. He gets all the glory. The ICOC has a history of boasting and self-glorification. I remember men being lifted up to an excessive degree and being given standing ovations. In a sermon from last year, an ICOC evangelist referred to the LAICOC as "God's church." What are they trying to win people to? People need to be won to Christ and be added to **his** church. The ICOC would do well to emulate Paul in this manner.

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

So, then, no more boasting about men!

1 Corinthians 3:5-7, 21)

So let's move on to true intimacy with Christ!

### **Who Gets the Credit?**

I was crying at church on a recent Sunday. I'm not sure why. A young woman was giving her testimony about what God has done in her life since her mother died a few months ago. A few days after the death, a friend of hers came forward at church and requested prayers for her. Most of the church came forward and put their hands on her as they prayed for her. The day the church prayed for her, I sat in my seat and wept. I couldn't contain the tears. My father died while I was in the ICOC, and as I watched the members of my current church touching this woman with love and support, the thought came to my mind, "That's what I needed when my dad died, and I didn't get it." My heart was filled with pain and I wept uncontrollably. Now, two months later, this woman was giving a testimony of how God had filled her with so much love she couldn't contain it. It was a wonderful testimony, but as I sat there listening to it, I felt empty, confused and distant from God. I don't know if that's what made me cry on this particular Sunday. I'd been suffering from depression, confusion and fatigue for a couple of weeks. The tears didn't make it any better or worse.

The next day was the Fourth of July and something interesting happened. We had hot dogs, ice cream and fireworks at the church, on the lawn of a house that the church owns. One of the elders told me that he was inspired by me in worship the day before. He said he saw my tears and that God saw them too. I was taken back by his comments. I don't know if he thought they were tears of joy, or if it was the vulnerability of the tears that inspired him. I didn't ask him; I didn't want to spoil anything for him. If he was inspired, something good will come of it. But it really got me to thinking. It's amazing how God can use us in our weakness to help others. He can use us even when we're completely unaware that he's doing it. A good bulk of the writing I've done in this paper was done while I was feeling depressed and uninspired. Writing was actually the last thing I wanted to do. The only reason I continued to write was because I was convinced that God wanted me to write, and that, no matter how I was feeling, he would give me the strength I needed to say the things he wanted said. The volume of writing that I've done when I didn't even want to write is staggering to me. Who gets the credit for that? Who gets the credit when something that we do inspires or encourages another person spiritually? Do we have the right to pat ourselves on the back and say, "well done?" Do I get brownie points for being "sacrificial" and "denying myself" for the writing that I've done the last few weeks?

I think this is a crucial topic if we're going to understand the nature of worship and who we were meant to be.

### ***When I Am Weak, Then I Am Strong***

Paul addresses a key issue related to this subject in 2 Corinthians 12. Let's read verses 1-10:

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know – God knows. And I know that this man – whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows – was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's

sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Do you want God's power to rest on you? Embrace your weaknesses. Surrender yourself to him to do whatever he pleases through your life. Acknowledge your inability to do anything pleasing to him in your own power. And he gets the credit. All of it. God won't share his glory with another (Isaiah 48:11). We are not to make any idols to go alongside God (Exodus 20:23). Not the idol of self. Not the idol of church. Not the idol of discipleship. Not the idol of evangelistic strategy.

I remember listening to people share their testimony in the ICOC. It was very different from the testimony I shared about at the beginning of this section. In most of the testimonies I recall, the ICOC was lifted up as much, if not more so, than God. Written testimonies on church websites were just as bad. People would talk about how messed up their lives were until disciples from the ICOC showed up and taught them how to be disciples. The church is wonderful! The discipling has really changed my life! Those aren't exact words, but it captures the sentiment. Where was God in all that boasting? One could argue that the church and the discipling methods came from God, so he was being glorified. But God, all too often, was **not** being credited with the changes in peoples' lives, or, if he was, it was as more of an afterthought. Jesus said that out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks (Matthew 12:34). The young woman who gave her testimony the other day just couldn't stop talking about how good God is. Though God used members of our church to show her his love, God himself was the one who got the credit, and I don't think anyone in the church disagreed with that assessment.

So, at this point, you may be thinking, "Don't worry about me boasting about the ICOC! You're years behind. God has humbled this church and there's nothing to boast about anymore." I'm aware that the ICOC has been seriously humbled since the Henry Kriete letter, and I believe it's for the good. Do you believe God was behind that humbling? I've heard of some people blaming Kriete, and I've heard of some people longing for "the good old days." That was the distinct feeling I got listening to "Attaining to Eternal Life." The evangelist reminisces about the days when people were "radically sacrificial." Anyone who wants to return to the good old days hasn't learned the lesson that I believe God is trying to teach them. If the ICOC returned to the good old days, what would be different? Less coercion, less manipulation, a little more freedom? That sounds like Kip McKean lite to me. Instead of trying to rebuild a monument to man and his methods, why not rather bow before Jesus, who is Lord of all, and ask him to show you the way? Glorify the Lord instead of a church movement. To go back to the abusive, unbiblical, failed methods of the past, but in a nicer, less controlling way, is like rearranging the furniture on the Titanic.

You don't have to wait for the ICOC to head in this direction. The decision that needs to be made is a personal decision to submit to Christ as Lord and Savior. It's done individually, one at a time, not in groups. Where is he going to lead you? I don't know. What is he going to want you to do? I don't know. Is he going to want you to leave the ICOC? I don't know. One of the most freeing things I've learned in my relationship with



God is that I'm not here to tell other people what to do. The ICOC was guilty of trying to be the Holy Spirit in peoples' lives. Now that I'm free from that system, I'm not going to continue to make that mistake. I'm not your Holy Spirit anymore than the ICOC is your Holy Spirit, or your discipleship partner is your Holy Spirit. My goal is simply to point the way to Jesus. Take another look at the woman who poured the alabaster jar of perfume on Jesus' feet. She bowed before her Lord with deep gratitude and love and poured out not just the perfume, but herself as well. Hear Paul's words in Philippians 1:21 as he neared the end of his life:

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Get a glimpse of heaven:

Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

“Holy, holy, holy  
is the Lord God Almighty,  
who was, and is, and is to  
come.

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

“You are worthy, our Lord and  
God,  
to receive glory and honor and  
power,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they were  
created  
and have their being.

Revelation 4:8-11

Who gets the credit in heaven? Have you ever wondered what it will be like in heaven? The Apostle John got a glimpse and shared it with the generations to come. Heaven is full of praise and worship of God Almighty. And so should our lives be full of worship and praise.

Some of the beliefs and practices I learned in the ICOC held me back from worshiping God in this way. The rest of this paper discusses them in detail.

## **Faith or Law? What are you relying on?**

We've seen how God gave Israel his laws to obey, and how thoroughly they failed in doing so. According to Romans 15:4 everything that was written in the Old Testament was written to teach us. So what are we to learn? Why did the Israelites fail to keep the law? Was the law inadequate? Since the law was given to Moses by God, I think we can safely rule out that possibility. Were the people not committed enough? Well, there were certainly some who put forth more effort than others, but it's a sure bet that they didn't keep the law perfectly. David is described in 1 Samuel 13:14 as a man after God's own heart. David loved God. He loved the things God loved and hated the things God hated, but he did not keep the law perfectly. The obvious example from scripture is detailed in 2 Samuel 11. He committed adultery with Bathsheba, then, when she became pregnant, conspired to kill her husband Uriah. When the prophet Nathan rebuked him, David repented and God forgave him, although there were consequences to his sin. In 1 Kings 14:8-9, several years after David's death, God gives a prophecy to King Jeroboam through the prophet Ahijah. Look at what God has to say about David.

I tore the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it to you,  
but you have not been like my servant David, who kept my commands  
and followed me with all his heart, doing only what was right in my eyes.

Did God not remember David's adultery and murder? Clearly David didn't only do what was right, according to the law, so what's going on here? James 2:10 says that whoever keeps the whole law, yet stumbles at one point is guilty of breaking all of it. The Lord had made a covenant with his people, a covenant that was binding as long as the parties were still alive. God didn't tell his people to do their best and obey most of the Law. God didn't view David as having done only what was right in his eyes because he obeyed most of the Law. In fact, David broke at least three of the Ten Commandments. Three out of ten is not a passing grade under the Law. The law demanded perfection, a perfection that no one could achieve, including David. Then on what basis is God judging David if not by the Law that David lived under and was required to obey? Look at Galatians 3. In verse 10 we read, "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse; for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.' The Book of the Law included not just the ten commandments, but all the regulations stipulated by God. We read something interesting in Galatians 3:11: "Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because the righteous will live by faith." (quoting Habakkuk 2:4). Verse 12 drives the point home that the Law was not based on faith. David was not accepted by God on the basis of his perfect obedience to the Law, but because of his faith. No one under the Old Covenant was justified before God by the law. Those that were justified were justified by faith. The same is true today. God's righteous servants under the Old Covenant were looking forward to the redemption of Christ, while we look back to that same redemption. They were saved by the same blood we're saved by.

So what was the purpose of the law if it didn't justify anyone? Was God just trying to frustrate his people by giving them laws they couldn't keep? Romans 7 provides the

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answer. Paul notes that the law made him conscious of his sin. It's worth taking a more careful look at this chapter. Let's review verses 7-12.

What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me and through the commandment put me to death. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

The purpose of the law was to shine a big old spotlight on our innate inability to be obedient to rules, now matter how holy and righteous they are. The Law of Moses wasn't the problem. That's why the issues that Paul is raising can't be shrugged off as irrelevant to us today because he's dealing with the Law of Moses, something that doesn't apply to us today. The principle here is as applicable to us as it was to them.

Paul's discourse sounds pretty weighty, but it's not really all that complicated. We've all experienced what he's talking about. You can see this principle in action when you tell your child he can't do something. Let's say you tell him he can't go outside. He can play with his toys in his room or watch t.v. in the living room, but he can't go outside. Now, what do you think he's going to want to do? He wants to do the one thing he was told he couldn't do. It's been that way since Adam and Eve took that fateful bite of the forbidden fruit. We find it impossible to be satisfied with limitations that are placed on us. You think that's not true? Have you ever gone on a diet? It's amazing the cravings you can develop when you diet. Just tell yourself that you can't eat anything fattening and you'll immediately start fantasizing about cheeseburgers, French fries and chocolate cake. If you eat anything on your "forbidden list" you're likely to feel guilty. And the longer you diet the crankier you'll probably get. No matter where the boundaries are drawn, human beings want to cross them. When the people were given the Law of Moses to obey, that became perfectly clear. Law will always have that affect.

Let's look at verse 13:

Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

The law not only shone a light on the sinfulness of man; it revealed the holiness of God. The law brought spiritual death and condemnation, not because the law was bad, but

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because of the corruption of the human heart. We have a sin problem in our very being that the law couldn't cure. In verses 14-25 Paul describes the torment of wanting to do what's right, but not having the power to do it. And this is from a man who loved God's Law and was trained in it. The problem wasn't that he didn't care enough or try hard enough. He couldn't do what was right in his own power and neither can we.

How does this apply today? I think most Christians realize they're not under the Law of Moses, but many Christians are still slaves to law. There's something very appealing about having a set of rules to follow. It eliminates confusion and gives us something to shoot for. We get inspired, at least initially, and determine that we're really going to go for it.

Let's imagine for a moment that you're a fairly new disciple. You feel that you're inconsistent in the way you're living your life. I'm your discipleship partner. You come to me and ask me what you need to do to be a more faithful Christian. So I draw up a game plan. It looks like this:

1. Have a 60-minute quiet time every morning before you go to work. Spend 30 minutes reading your Bible and 30 minutes praying.
2. Invite one new person to church everyday.
3. Confess your sins to me everyday.

That's it. It's not too much, is it? You look at the list and feel inspired. "Yes," you say, "this is a good plan. These are the things I haven't been doing. I'll start on this first thing in the morning."

The first day starts out great. You have your 60-minute quiet time and you feel really good about yourself and your relationship with God. "I'm headed in the right direction now," you think. You go to work, thinking along the way who you can invite to church. A woman that you work with comes to mind, and you pray for the courage to reach out to her.

You get to work a few minutes early and head to the break room to get some coffee. There's one other person in the break room, the woman you plan to invite to church! This is a perfect opportunity! God led you right to her. Her name is Linda. You strike up a conversation. "Hi Linda. How are you doing?" "Okay," she says, "but I'd rather still be in bed." "Yeah, I know what you mean," you say, then spend a few awkward minutes trying to think of a smooth transition to a discussion about church. Your heart starts to pound and your palms sweat. "Don't be anxious," you tell yourself. You're still trying to think of something to say when another employee enters the break room and starts a conversation with her. Feeling deflated, you head back to your desk, kicking yourself for missing a golden opportunity. You begin to berate yourself mentally for giving in to fear. "It's okay," you reassure yourself. "I'll invite her later." The rest of the morning goes

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alright, except for that nagging bit of anxiety in the pit of your stomach every time you see Linda.

You take another stab during lunch. You sit down in the break room with a number of other employees, including Linda. One of your fellow employees talks about the health problems she's been having and how it's making it difficult for her to keep up with her work. You make a sympathetic comment about the situation, looking at Linda out of the corner of your eye. You try to be friendly and engage your co-workers in conversation, but you can't stop thinking about how to approach Linda. Timing is critical and you're afraid you won't get another chance that day. Linda is finished with lunch and heads to the restroom. You follow her into the restroom though you hadn't planned on going. You slowly wash your hands, examine your blouse and straighten your hair while you wait for Linda to exit the restroom stall. She comes out and as she washes her hands, you comment, "Your lunch looked good. Where did you get it?" You half-listen to her response while you plan what you're going to say. You start to say, "I wanted to ask you something..." just as someone walks through the door, distracting Linda, who turns around to see who it is and to say, "hi," and you suddenly feel insecure, unable to get the next word out of your mouth. "Later," Linda says, as she walks out the door.

"Ugh!" you think, as you head back to the break room. "Satan is totally thwarting me. I should have just said it, interruption or not."

At the end of the day, you head to the parking lot feeling down, when you see Linda getting into her car. With a sudden surge of determination, you walk over to her. "Hey Linda. I wanted to ask you if you want to come to church with me Sunday." "Oh, thank you honey. I've got plans. Maybe some other time." Adrenaline is pumping through your veins and you feel victorious. You conquered your fear. You overcame the obstacles and invited her to church. You call me later that night, happy to report the success you experienced. I praise you for a job well done and give you a scripture about not being afraid. As you hang up, you decide to study fear in your quiet time the next morning.

So you get up the next day and look up numerous verses about fear. You go into your day thinking about not fearing people. But when you attempt to invite the mail clerk to church, fear clutches at your throat and you can't speak. You don't understand. You studied several awesome passages about fear. You asked God to help you not be afraid. You reminded yourself several times not to be afraid. You're frustrated and angry at yourself. Now, here it is, the end of the work day and you haven't shared your faith with anyone. Feeling discouraged, you stop by the mall to find someone to invite to church. You hesitantly walk into a few stores, eyeballing a customer or two that you want to share with, but you don't. You call me that night and confess your cowardice. I tell you I understand, that I struggle with it too, and that you need to persevere because God will help you. Tomorrow is another day.

Only tomorrow isn't another day. It's the same day again! You're really struggling now, so I offer to go sharing with you at the mall, and you agree. We go to the mall and after a few false starts, you screw up the courage to invite someone, and they're interested!

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You're encouraged by that and so you invite somebody else. It's getting easier. You're feeling better about your evangelism and you do pretty well the rest of the week. You're not even all that fearful to approach people. You're getting the hang of it, and you're feeling good about your relationship with God.

On Sunday night you watch a movie that reminds you of an ex-boyfriend and it makes you sad. In order to comfort yourself, you eat half a bag of cookies and a pint of ice cream. You think that maybe you should confess it to me, but you decide not to because you're embarrassed. So you start the work week feeling guilty and discouraged. You find yourself looking lustfully at the male co-worker in the cubicle next to you. You feel even worse now. You feel so bad by the time you get home that you polish off a large bag of potato chips and the half-bag of cookies left over from the binge the night before. I try to call you, but you don't pick up because you're afraid to confess your sins.

Your quiet times are getting shorter and you're having a hard time praying. You haven't shared your faith with anyone all week, and you're avoiding me. I'm concerned about you and try again to get a hold of you. You admit it's not going well. You confess your sins and your struggles at having your quiet times. I'm concerned about your spiritual struggles, so I suggest you set up quiet times three times over the next week with other sisters. So you set up the quiet times and that seems to help. You invite someone to church three times out of five days and you confess your sins to me daily. You're feeling better about your relationship with God now. You're grateful to have disciples in your life to help you be faithful to God.

This is the dilemma that we face as Christians. Goals can be helpful. They help us get focused. But goals can become task masters. We have to be clear on what it is we're trying to accomplish. In the above scenario you state as your goal the desire to be a more faithful disciple of Jesus. The problem is that being a disciple entails relationship. In John 6, Jesus is asked, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" How many of us have asked the same question? Tell us what we need to do God. Give us the check-off list and we'll follow it. The problem is, God already gave his people a check-off list and they couldn't follow it. But we so want the list, don't we? We want the list so we can know if we're doing alright. We want to be assured that we're in the club, and, quite frankly, we want a way to determine who **isn't** in the club. But under the New Covenant, God doesn't give us a list. Yet that hasn't stopped us from coming up with our own lists.

What was your thought when I presented the check-off list on how to be a more faithful disciple? Did it seem reasonable to you? Did you think it was too simple, that there should have been more points? Did you have a few more that you wanted to add? Or did you think the list missed the point altogether? If so, Jesus would agree with you. In John 6:29, Jesus answers our question. "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." But all too often, that isn't the answer we want to hear, and it certainly isn't the answer we give others. "You need to attend all the church services in order to be faithful." "How are you doing in your giving?" "Are you sharing your faith?" There are many tools we can employ to help us grow in our faith, but we start to focus on the tools themselves. Jesus said we need to believe, but that frustrates us because we're not sure

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what that looks like. So we create our checklists, so we can prove to ourselves and others that we're following Jesus for real. But how do I know if my checklist is accurate? What if I missed something? What if my checklist says to share my faith with one person daily and your checklist says to share with two people daily? What if your list includes a longer quiet time and more church meetings? Are you more faithful than I am? It may sound silly but church movements have been built around that mentality. I know because I was apart of one. And if you're reading this, there's a good chance that you've been a part of one, and may be part of one now.

In the picture I painted, what is our eager young Christian primarily focused on as she goes throughout her day? She's so focused on having that 60-minute quiet time that she's focused on the time spent with God rather than focusing on God himself. She walks away from the quiet time pleased with herself for meeting the goal rather than praising God for who he is. She's so focused on inviting someone to church each day that it interferes with her ability to genuinely care about her co-workers and to have sincere conversations with them. She was so anxious about meeting the goal that she failed to notice a co-worker who was really hurting. What if, instead of her insistence on inviting Linda to church, she had focused on offering assistance to the co-worker with health issues, maybe offered to help her get caught up on her filing? Although this is a fictional story, it hits close to home in my life. I've been that woman. I can't imagine how many needs I failed to see because of my blind insistence on following a check-off list. How many opportunities does God put in our paths that we don't see because we've got our plan in place and we're just waiting for God to bless it?

Our relationship with God needs to be, in reality, a relationship. My relationship with God is the most exciting thing in my life, bar none. I don't know where we're going, but we're going together, with him leading the way through his Holy Spirit, and it's exciting. One thing I know for certain: my life is going to be far more productive with God in the lead than it ever was when I insisted on taking the reins.

The other point I want to make on this imaginary scenario concerns discipling relationships. This is such an important topic that I'm going to devote a whole section on it. But since this section is related to faith versus law, the question needs to be asked: is the discipling relationship that our imaginary young Christian has entered into likely, in the long run, to build her faith? Is it leading her to misplace her faith? If our salvation is based on faith, not law, then it's vitally important where our faith is placed.

We all have faith in someone or something. It's impossible to go throughout life without some form of faith.

The Bible gives us some interesting examples in the Bible to help us understand this issue. Genesis 12-23 tells the story of Abram, later to be renamed Abraham. The Lord called Abram to leave his country, his people, and his father's household to go to a place the Lord would show him (Genesis 12). He also gave Abram a promise, detailed in Genesis 12:2-3:

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“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Abram was 75 years old and had no children, yet God promised to make him into a great nation. You have to wonder what thoughts were going through his head. God had just told him to leave everything behind that he knew, all of his security, not knowing what lay ahead, then gave him this extraordinary promise. It looked like Abraham's life was nearly over, but the most significant portion of his life was yet to come. It's such a comfort to realize that it's never too late for any of us to seek God with all our hearts, as long as we still have breath. Our best days may still be ahead of us.

Abram obeyed the voice of the Lord and left, not knowing where he was going. Some time later, after he and his nephew Lot had separated, God spoke to Abram again, and told him that he and his wife Sarai would have a son, though both of them were past age. Check out what it says in Genesis 15:6: “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” This is a very critical point that we'll touch on later.

Abram believed that God had the power to do what he said, but the Lord didn't fulfill his promise immediately. And you know what happens when we have to wait. Doubts start to creep in. Maybe I misunderstood him. Maybe he changed his mind. I really am too old to have children. Sarai had her doubts, so she came up with a plan of her own. She gave Abram her maidservant Hagar, with the hope that he could have a son through her. Abram must have been having his own doubts, because he agreed to Sarai's plan, and had a son with Hagar, whom he named Ishmael. Now God would be able to bless Abram's descendants and make them as numerous as the stars in the sky, just as he promised. There was only one problem. Ishmael wasn't the child of promise. God was going to give Abram a son with his wife Sarai. Sarai's womb was barren and she was past childbearing age, but God was going to be glorified through her and show his might and power. God had the plan. Abram and Sarai just needed to trust him and it would unfold at the proper time. But Abram and Sarai were impatient and didn't trust God. They wanted to make it happen themselves. But God didn't accept their substitute plan. He gave them a son, just as he promised. Isaac, the son of promise, through whom God would give Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars, and from whom the Messiah would one day come to save his people.

God had proven faithful to his promise, but he was about to give Abraham the test of his life, asking him to sacrifice his only son Isaac, the son of promise. Abraham's obedience was amazing. He showed himself to be a man of faith and set an example not only to the Jewish nation but to all of us.

From Isaac came Jacob, and from Jacob, twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. It was out of the tribe of Judah, from David's line, that the messiah came into the world. Truly, all nations were blessed through Abraham.



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So what's the point of this history lesson? Romans 11 has a very interesting illustration that I'd like to look at, but it was necessary to look back at the origins of the Jewish nation in order to understand what the scripture is communicating. The scripture is found in Romans 11:13-21:

I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: you do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

Tree imagery is often used in the Bible to teach us about dependence on God. Psalm 1 says:

"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3).

Jeremiah 17:7-8 reads:

"But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

Jesus used the illustration of a grape vine in John 15 to show us our need for dependence on him:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you

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bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches: If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

John 15:1-6

Those of us in Christ are the branches, and he is the vine from which we draw our life source. The majority of us do not come from a Jewish background; in the olive tree analogy in Romans 11, we're wild branches that have been grafted into the tree after the natural branches were broken off.

Most of the Jews rejected Jesus, not recognizing him as the promised messiah. He was Abraham's seed, yet his own people rejected him. He was sent to save them, but they didn't recognize him as their savior because they saw no need for a savior. A political savior, perhaps, but not a savior of their souls. They cut themselves off from God's salvation due to unbelief.

Let's see what we can learn from this. We can glean a lot of information about what led to their rejection of Christ by looking at Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

The first mention of the Pharisees in the gospel accounts occurs in Matthew 3:7-10, and, in this first instance, before the beginning of Christ's ministry, the interaction is with John the Baptist. People are coming out to the desert to be baptized by John. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He came to clear the way for the messiah. Starting in verse 7, we read:

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Wow! Can you imagine being a minister and having John the Baptist in your congregation? You'd better be on your toes! John knew who he was dealing with. He wasn't fooled by their religiosity. He knew they saw themselves as superior to the common people, and saw no need to be baptized by him. You kind of wonder why they even showed up. To snicker at the spectacle? To shake their heads at the ignorance of the masses?

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Jesus was definitely not fooled by them. He told the people, in Matthew 5:20, that they would never enter the kingdom of heaven unless their righteousness exceeded that of the Pharisees. Jesus reveals something here that the Pharisees don't want to hear: their ultra-strict observance of the Law was not going to get them into heaven. They took great pride in the Law and in their meticulous observance. They added legalistic minutiae to the law in order to enhance their own sense of piety and separate themselves from the people who couldn't follow all of their traditions and rules. Jesus addressed this in Matthew 15:1-9

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"

Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

"These people honor me with  
their lips,  
but their hearts are far from  
me.  
They worship me in vain;  
Their teachings are but rules  
taught my men.

They cut themselves off from God's nourishment because they thought they could do it on their own.

### **The Greatest Commandment**

So, if we're not under law, but under grace, the obvious question is this: What's to prevent us from sinning, from just living however we please? Most of us have probably known people who claim to be Christians, yet are living just like those who don't know Christ. Such people seem to think that grace is a license to sin. This is sometimes referred to as "cheap grace," and is pointed to as a reason for establishing rules in the church and emphasizing works. Paul dealt with the same problem in his day, as detailed in the following passage in Romans 6:

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?  
By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to

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sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

Romans 6:15-18

We are no longer under law, but we are not lawless. The law no longer has jurisdiction over us. It no longer has the power to enslave us. Jesus did what we couldn't do. He fulfilled the law (Matthew 5:17-20). He met the righteous requirements of the law, that we couldn't meet, and through faith in him and his blood, we're now free from the curse of the law.

Paul gives us further insight into this, in Colossians 2:6-23. This is a lengthy passage, but I want to include it in its entirety because it goes beyond the Mosaic law and explains the problem with human regulations, something that's very applicable in our day.

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you from the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body,

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supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility, and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Look at the last paragraph. Are there any human regulations you’ve been submitting to in your relationship with God? Verse 23 tells us that such regulations can have the appearance of wisdom, but they don’t work in restraining sin. Rules never do. I heard a story on the radio recently about a pastor who forbade the members of his congregation from using Facebook, because several people from the flock had become involved in adultery after reconnecting with people from their past on the popular social network. Was that a good idea? It sounds wise, doesn’t it? After all, there was a sin problem in his church related to spending time on Facebook. So the solution is simple. The people need to stay away from Facebook. That should solve the problem, right? Does Facebook really have the power to make people break their wedding vows? According to Colossians 2, what do these people really need? The entire passage is focused on the power and sufficiency of Christ. Let’s break them down.

- So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, **continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him**, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.
- See to it that no one takes you captive with hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world **rather than on Christ**.
- **For in Christ, all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ**, who is the head over every power and authority.
- When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, **God made you alive with Christ**.

The power to overcome sin and live a godly life comes from being in Christ, being rooted and established in him, walking with him through faith. Remember what he told the Jews in John 6 when they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” His response was, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” Our first, and primary, responsibility as Christians is to know Christ. Everything stems from that. The ICOC talked about having a relationship with God through Jesus, but they emphasized

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works to such a degree that it's clear they didn't really believe in the power we gain from being in Christ.

Jesus drives this point home in Matthew 7:21-23:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

This is a sobering passage. It's not just the things we do in God's name that matter; why we're doing them matters a great deal to God. He's not impressed with our works. Performing works for God, without knowing Christ, is relying on self and our ability to perform well enough to please God.

When I was in the ICOC we talked about wanting to do great things for God. What's wrong with that? It's great if the things we're doing are the things he wants us to be doing. The Pharisees thought they were doing great things for God when they killed Jesus, and then persecuted his followers. They knew they were right. They had the law on their side. They were Abraham's sons. But they didn't have a relationship with God. The law became a snare for them. They were deceived into thinking they could please God by obeying the law. Jesus gives us some insight into this in his confrontation with the Pharisees in John 8. The Pharisees have placed great confidence in being descendants of Abraham, in being God's chosen people. But look at what Jesus tells them:

I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word. I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father.

John 8:37-38

They protest that Abraham is their father. Listen to Jesus' response:

“If you were Abraham's children,” said Jesus, “then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the things your own father does.

John 8:39-41

God spoke to Abraham, and he did what God told him to do, even to the point of offering his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Hebrews 11 tells us that Abraham was acting in faith. Abraham's trust was in God, but not all of his physical descendants were spiritual descendants. The true sons of Abraham are those who walk by faith. The Pharisees didn't

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walk by faith. They trusted in the law, or to be more precise, their ability to keep the law, instead of trusting in the giver of the law.

Let's continue in John 8. The Pharisees are no longer using Abraham as a defense. Now they're claiming that the only father they have is God. Jesus says to them:

“If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling you the truth, why don't you believe me? He who believes in God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.

John 8:42-47

In John 10:14-16, Jesus tells us that those who know him hear his voice:

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

In verse 4 Jesus states that the shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them. They follow him because they know his voice, but they won't follow a stranger.

We need to cultivate the ability to hear Jesus' voice. Commonly, in the Church of Christ, the ability to hear God's voice is limited to reading what he says in his word. Knowing the scriptures is vital in order to discern truth, but there are limitations to simply learning scripture. Gaining knowledge is not the same thing as having a relationship with God. Jesus told the Jews, in John 5:39-40:

“You diligently study the scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”

Studying the scriptures daily is a good practice, but reading and knowing the scriptures won't save us. The scriptures lead us to Jesus. It is our trust and belief in Jesus as our sacrifice, and acceptance of him as Lord and Savior, that saves. It can't be overstated how important it is to know Christ on a personal level. The ICOC greatly hindered my ability to know Christ and hear his voice for myself in a couple of ways, which I will go over in the next section on discipleship.

## **Our Wonderful Counselor**

I feel the need to make a brief comment about the difference between justification and sanctification. I've tried to steer clear of theology because I don't feel that I'm qualified in that area, but these two terms are vital in our Christian lives, even if never use them.

Justification is the doctrine that God pardons, accepts, and declares a sinner to be “just” on the basis of Christ’s righteousness (Romans 3:24-26, 5:15-21) which results in God’s peace (Romans 5:1), His Spirit (Romans 8:4), and salvation. Justification is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ apart from all works and merit of the sinner (Romans 1:18-3:28). Justification is a one-time legal act, unlike sanctification, which is a process. Sanctification means “to set apart” for special use or purpose, that is, to make holy or sacred. In Christianity, sanctification most commonly refers to the change brought about by God in a believer, begun at the point of salvation or justification and continuing throughout the life of a believer.<sup>6</sup> I think this quote from John Murray says it really well:

*“Indeed, the more sanctified the person is, the more conformed he is to the image of his Savior, the more he must recoil against every lack of conformity to the holiness of God. The degree his apprehension of the majesty of God, the greater the intensity of his love to God, the more persistent his yearning for the attainment of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, the more conscious will he be of the gravity of the sin that remains and the more poignant will be his detestation of it.”<sup>7</sup>*

How does all this work itself out in real life? Once we’ve come into a relationship with God, how do we become more like Jesus?

It’s a bit of a paradox, as described in Philippians 2:12-13:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

I read a commentary by John McArthur which I found informative. I’d like to share some of his thoughts. He said there are two camps in Christianity that come down on opposite sides on the question of sanctification. Quietists believe that the Christian does nothing to achieve Christ-likeness. To the Quietist, the sanctification process takes place wholly as a result of our complete surrender to God. It’s passive in its nature. Pietists believe in using all their faculties and abilities to grow up into Christ. It’s aggressive in its nature.<sup>8</sup> There are problems with both viewpoints. The problem that I see with Quietism is that faith is not passive, according to scripture. Romans 1:5 says that obedience comes from faith. Then, of course, there is the famous “Faith and Deeds” section in James 2.

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<sup>6</sup> [www.theopedia.com](http://www.theopedia.com)

<sup>7</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*

<sup>8</sup> John McArthur, *Grace to You*, [www.gty.org](http://www.gty.org)



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Let's look at it.

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.

James 2:14-19

Let's now take a look at 2 Peter 1:5-9, in which the Apostle Peter gives us the following exhortation.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, are we to be Pietists? Peter **did** say to make every effort. John McArthur points out that Pietism tends to easily become self-reliance, leading to either pride (over a job well done) or despair (over our failure). The scriptures promote neither Quietism nor Pietism. Take another look at James 2. I think Christians often misunderstand these passages. There's a tension throughout the New Testament between what God is working within us and the work that we're doing. In discussing Philippians 2:12-13, McArthur puts it this way, "The Christian is working out and God is working within." James 2 is not telling us to add works to our faith. It's telling us that genuine faith in Christ leads to good deeds. If we feel that, like the church in Sardis addressed in Revelation 3, our deeds are not complete in God's sight, the answer is not to add deeds to our faith. The solution is to examine the quality of our faith. Where, and in whom, have we placed our faith? In God? Is it the God of the Bible? I used to believe in a God that was holy, but not very gracious. This God expected a lot from me, and was angry when I let him down. Truth be told, I'm not sure I really believed that this God liked me all that much. I felt like he tolerated me. It's difficult to put your faith in a God that you feel is constantly disappointed in you. What kind of faith comes out of a distorted view of God like that? It was easy to accept the ICOC discipling structure. Since it appeared that God had exceptionally high standards he expected me to meet, I needed all the help I could get. So what was I putting

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my faith in? I was taught that I wouldn't make it to heaven without close friends and discipling. An ICOC evangelist said the same thing in Houston in his recent sermon on discipleship. Do you believe that? If so, where are you placing your faith? You may say, "My faith is in God. He works through people to mature us." Other Christians play a role in our development, but anytime we become dependent on other people for our very salvation, our faith is misplaced.

Take another look at 2 Peter 1. We just read verses 5-9. Those verses need to be considered in context. Look at the verses that proceed verses 5-9.

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

2 Peter 1:3-4

This scripture is similar to Philippians 2:12-13, in that it tells us to do something in order to grow in Christ, but also tells us that the power to do it comes from God. It's easy to talk about God's power, then walk out the door and rely on ourselves. That's why it's vitally important to really know who God is from scripture; his nature, his character, his dealings with us; and it's vital to know him in a personal, intimate way. 2 Peter 1:3 tells us God's divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness, through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. I notice two components in this verse that I want to touch upon.

- He called us – The Lord called us to salvation in Christ, not because of anything we did, but because of his own glory and goodness.
- We've been given divine power to live the Christian life – We can participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption of the world! We participate in the divine nature through the Holy Spirit.

I think it's important that we touch upon the power and work of the Holy Spirit, because the ICOC traditionally has not properly taught about the Holy Spirit, or understood his work and nature. First of all, notice that I referred to the Holy Spirit as "He," not "It." The Holy Spirit is God, a truth that some in the ICOC seem to be uncertain about. A "lay" leader in Cincinnati recently taught a lesson about the Holy Spirit, in which he confessed his lack of understanding about the nature of the Spirit, and repeatedly referred to the Spirit as "it." This man is being allowed to teach in the church! I once had a discipler who did the same thing, and when I corrected her, she defensively stated, "I always think of the Holy Spirit as 'it.'" You may think this is a matter of semantics, but it's much more important than that. This touches on the very nature of God. I won't discuss the triune nature of God in this paper, except to note that we don't need to fully understand the nature of the Trinity to know that it's a truth taught in scripture. Let's

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have enough reverence for our holy God to take the time to know who he is, and to speak of him properly, in accordance with scripture.

What does scripture say about the Holy Spirit? Romans 8:9-11 tells us a great deal about him and his workings within us.

You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

Do you see the beautiful, unified, triune nature of God expressed in these verses – one God, three distinct persons? The Holy Spirit is described as both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. The Holy Spirit is just as much God as are the Father and the Son. He's not an impersonal force or power. If you're in Christ, God lives in you through his Spirit, empowering you to live the Christian life. He's our Counselor (John 14:26); he can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30). We miss something very vital when we think of the Holy Spirit as a something rather than a someone, as a force rather than God Almighty. He's not a tool that we use at our discretion, as if God's Spirit were here to serve us. We're to submit to his leading. Depersonalizing the Spirit and undermining his role in our lives is not only a serious theological error; it also diminishes the reality of submission to God in our lives. It also robs us of intimacy with God. We can have intimacy with a person; we can't have intimacy with a force. I'll discuss this topic more in the Discipleship section.

Who's in control of our lives? When we realize that God lives inside of us, it humbles us and makes us give more thought to the agendas that we're forever trying to get God to rubber stamp.

### **What hinders you?**

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Hebrews 12:1-3

I love this scripture because it cuts to the heart of the struggles we so frequently face and acknowledges that we're not alone in our struggles.

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I've heard that when a scripture starts with the word "therefore," we need to find what it's "there fore." The twelfth chapter is giving us direction based on something that was taught in Chapter 11. So let's take a peek at this great chapter of faith. The chapter starts out with the following observation:

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.  
Hebrews 11:1-2

This is an intriguing observation, because it's easy to think of the Old Testament as being about law, and the New Testament as being about grace. But this kind of thinking misses a great truth that God teaches us throughout the Bible. The faithful men and women that lived under the Old Covenant were not "graceless," and the faithful men and women we read about in the New Testament were not "lawless." There is a common glue, if you will, between the faithful who lived under the Old Covenant, and the faithful who live under the New Covenant, and that glue is faith. Verse 2 of Hebrews 11 tells us that the ancients were commended for their faith, not their perfect law-keeping, as much as the Pharisees would have liked to believe otherwise. We read in Hebrews 11:3

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

Verse 6 informs us that it's impossible to please God without faith, because it takes faith to believe in his existence and to believe that he'll reward those who seek him.

So if we believe that God exists, that he created everything and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him, we have faith. We sometimes feel like we have no faith, but we do. It might be mustard seed-sized faith, but God can do a lot with just a little bit of faith. Let's not underestimate the power of our mighty God.

Take a few minutes to read through Hebrews 11. It's amazing how many powerful and miraculous things God did through these people. We stand amazed at Abraham and Moses, but we're not that different from them. They weren't perfect people. Abraham lied twice about his relationship with Sarah, saying she was his sister rather than his wife. Moses begged God to send someone else to rescue the Israelites from the hand of the Egyptians. What made the difference in their lives, and in the lives of everyone mentioned in this chapter, is their faith. The fact that they stood out among the people of their day shows how rare a commodity true Biblical faith really is. But it unleashes the power of God. Jesus couldn't do many miracles in his hometown, not because of any lack in him, but because of the lack of faith in that town. An entire city, or country, can be faithless to a large degree, but God knows those who are his, even if there are only a few.

So how do we become some of the few? What characteristics distinguish a person of faith? Hebrews 11 gives us some answers.

### **1. Faith looks ahead**

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as an inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder was God.

Hebrews 11:8-10

Faith looks ahead, trusting that God has something better planned for us in eternity. Abraham left his home and his family, not knowing where he was going. It's a little like that exercise where one person is blindfolded and is led around by their partner. It's a bit scary to put one step ahead of the other when you don't know where it's going to land. Abraham set out into the great unknown, uncertain of where he was going to land, but he had faith that God had a reward in store for him, something that made living in a tent worthwhile.

### **2. Faith trusts in the faithfulness of God**

Verse 11 tells us that Abraham was enabled to father Isaac, despite Sarah's barren womb, because he considered the One who had made the promise to be faithful. Faith is only as good as the object in which it's placed. The more we trust God's faithfulness, the more we're enabled to walk by faith.

### **3. Faith makes us foreigners**

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Hebrews 11:15-16

This scripture reminds me of the old song "This World Is Not My Home."

This world is not my home  
I'm just a passin' through  
My treasures are laid up  
Somewhere beyond the blue  
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door

And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.<sup>9</sup>

Psalm 73 echoes this refrain, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you."

We're sojourners in this world, mere travelers passing through. Our real home is in heaven, and that's where our treasure needs to be. It's easy to sing about it, but how many of us really live, day to day, as aliens and strangers in the world? It's a mark of faith to have hearts focused on heaven while we walk on the earth. The depth of our faith is shown in our daily priorities, some of which can be seen by the human eye, and some of which cannot. People can see our actions, but only God sees the heart. That's why we need to be careful about labeling people as "uncommitted" simply by what the eye sees.

#### **4. Faith conquers fear**

By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

By faith [Moses] left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who was invisible.

Hebrews 11:23,27

This is probably the most challenging point in this list for me. I've always struggled with fear. This passage shows me that the antidote to fear is faith. Focusing on our fear makes the fear more intense; focusing on God enables us to overcome our fear. We see this principle at work in Numbers 13, when the Lord commanded Moses to send some men to explore the land of Canaan, the land that the Lord had chosen as their inheritance. Moses chose twelve men, one from each tribe, to explore the land and bring back a report according to their convictions. What's the land like? Are the people weak or strong? How many of them are there? Are the towns fortified?

So they went on the mission and did what they were asked to do, and the results are instructive.

All of the men agreed that it was a very fruitful land, but the inhabitants there were large and powerful. In Numbers 13:28-29 we're given this account:

"But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the

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<sup>9</sup> This World Is Not My Home: Albert Brumley, songwriter

sea and along the Jordan.”

At this point, they’re reporting factual information. It’s not wrong to face the facts when we’re up against a difficult situation where we’re outnumbered, or when we’re up against an opponent who’s stronger than we are. It’s our response that matters. Caleb, one of the spies, speaks to the assembly in verse 30 and says, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.” Caleb was aware of what they were up against because he had gone into the land and witnessed it with his own eyes. But in verses 31-33, we see a different attitude from the men who went up with him:

But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”

It’s amazing to think that these men saw the same thing that Caleb saw, but Caleb was looking through the eyes of faith, and the other men were looking through eyes of fear. The Lord told Moses, in Numbers 14:24, that Caleb had a different spirit from the other men, and that he followed his God wholeheartedly.

Look at the sins the men committed as a result of their fear. They discouraged their fellow Israelites, leading them to rebel against the Lord. They were afraid to fight, so they set about making the others afraid to fight as well. Misery loves company, as they say.

Have you ever seen this faith/fear dynamic played out? When my husband and I were questioning some of the teachings and practices of the ICOC, there were people who spread a bad report about my husband, accusing him of slander. My husband’s goal was to get at the truth, not to disparage anyone’s character, and he was careful not to name names. But the immediate reaction on the part of some members was to defend the church, no matter how valid the questions were that were raised. A lot of people left the ICOC around the time that we did, but there were a lot of stories circulating about people who were afraid that if they left the ICOC, they would fall away from God and their lives would unravel. There were many people at that time who were unwilling to seriously consider the concerns that were raised, so their decision to remain in the ICOC was not an informed decision with careful thought and prayer behind it. Is that acting out of faith or reacting out of fear? What were they trusting in? Where was their faith placed?

## **5. Faith endures suffering**

[Moses] chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

Hebrews 11:25-26

Some faced jeers and flogging while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Hebrews 11:36-38

## **6. Faith glorifies God**

God was able to do amazing feats through the people of faith listed in Hebrews 11; feats that have inspired faith in God for generations. By trusting in God and walking in obedience to his revelation in their lives, they enabled him to go beyond natural expectations and perform miracles that magnified his name among the nations.

The admonition in Hebrews 12:1-3 is being made in light of the examples of faith that have gone before us. We can be inspired by them, because we know what God did in their lives. They were looking ahead and walking by faith. We look back and see that God was faithful to all of his promises to them, and he will be faithful to us as well. And unlike them, we have received the promised Messiah. They only welcomed him from a distance. How much more reason do we have to be faithful? We know the messiah; we can fix our eyes upon him and follow him wholeheartedly. He sacrificed himself for our sins and rose from the dead, proving himself to be the Son of God. How much more trustworthy could anybody be? Who else, or what else, could we put our faith in, that we could be more sure of? There's no better investment of our hearts, our time, or our lives, than our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He's already won the victory for us.

What are the things that hinder us from wholeheartedly running the race of faith? For a long time I didn't quite trust Jesus enough to give him my whole heart. I was moral and did the proper religious things: went to church, read my Bible, gave my money to the church, served in various ministries, but my mind and my heart didn't really belong to Christ fully. I didn't believe that Jesus would really bring the fulfillment and peace my heart craved. I had my little idols that I held onto – entertainment, food, daydreams. These were the thing that made me feel happy, took away boredom, distracted me from lonely, painful thoughts. I knew deep down that I wasn't giving Jesus everything. It wasn't until 2011 that I made a decision to fully give the Lord every area of my heart, even the nooks and crannies where I like to hide. I'm not saying I haven't struggled or that there may not be a few dark crevices I'm unaware of; those he'll make clear to me in due time. But there are scriptures in the Bible that have deeper meaning to me than they ever have before. I'm experiencing a leading and a filling of the Holy Spirit that was previously rare in my life. I'm experiencing a rate of spiritual growth I've never experienced before. And God deserves all the glory.



## **Discipling: God's Plan or a Method of Man?**

I listened to a sermon the other day by an ICOC leader on discipleship. He delivered the sermon on June 12, 2011. It was a very interesting sermon. I hadn't listened to an ICOC sermon in years. It's amazing how little has changed, at least in his world. The sermon was entitled "God's Plan of Salvation: Discipleship." He said repeatedly throughout the sermon that discipling was God's plan. Since discipling relationships are the primary thing that set the ICOC apart from mainstream churches, it's vital that we take a look at this topic in some depth.

I can't count the number of sermons and lessons I heard when I was in the ICOC that focused on discipleship. When I was in the ICOC I took very detailed notes. Our evangelists often asked us questions regarding our relationship with God to get us to think. I wrote down those questions. Here are a number of questions related to discipleship that were raised in sermons in the ICOC from my notes. Some of them are "shorthand" (not a complete sentence). I'll start a new paragraph for each set of sermon questions.

1. People in your Bible Talk – do you know what they're struggling with? Try to sit by them, pray for them, know what's going on in their life, get in with them? Do you help them with their sin?
2. How much do you help people in your Bible Talk? What does your discipler like to do? What does she like to eat?
3. Are you building real and lasting relationships?
4. Where did the apostles learn to make disciples? What does a disciple look like?
5. Does somebody else have to pump you up?
6. How vulnerable are you in asking for help?
7. Are your relationships real and refreshing? Are you attacking or slacking?
8. Who is helping you in your spiritual dreams for God, and who are you helping?
9. Will you learn and be trained by anyone? Do you look like your coach? Do you remind people of your discipler? How easy are you to train? Thankful to be trained?
10. Do what is right by getting lots of help – how much are you putting this into practice? Why don't we get help?
11. Do you confess your sin more or are you confronted more? Open with weaknesses or hiding? Think you'll do it better with a different discipler? Not growing because no one's

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challenging you? How easy are you to disciple? How thankful are you for your discipler? How often do you talk to her? How do you respond to conflict, when you feel unhappy?

12. Do you quarrel with your discipler a lot? What would your husband say? Submissive to your discipler? People younger than you? Can someone be confident in you?

13. Do you still confess your sins everyday? Accept correction?

14. Will you be ready when someone tells you that you need to change?

15. How do you respond when a woman of God confronts you? Do you run and hide, pout? Open about struggles?

16. Are you persistent in getting help or do you quit?

17. How does discipling win the world? How should discipling work in leadership? Are you discipling with expectations? Is everyone being a disciple? For weak people, what's the plan to get them strong?

18. Are our disciples equipped?

19. How aggressive are you to get coached? Do you go after coaching? Where do you want to be down the road?

20. How much do you go after discipling?

21. Why did God put your discipler in your life? What are you learning from her?

22. Who are your closest friends? Who's calling your higher, believing in you through thick and thin?

23. How often do you confess sins?

24. How do you respond when you're confronted with something? How open are you to being wrong? What is your response time to conviction?

25. Are you using scriptures to help others?

Are we scripturally required to be disciplined by other Christians? I think it's important to address this topic because it's such a core issue in the ICOC. The ICOC is not the only church to practice discipleship. Discipleship, whether practiced one-one-one or in a group, is a practical way to put the "one another" passages of the New Testament into practice. Here are a few of those verses.

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms,

hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”  
Colossians 3:16

“You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.”

Galatians 5:13

Discipleship programs were developed as a way to put these verses into practice and as a method to facilitate spiritual growth. So discipleship can be helpful. But, I would contend that discipleship, as it is taught and practiced in the ICOC, is unbiblical and harmful.

The core issue is this: what role does discipleship play in the life of a Christian? Let's start by defining the word “disciple.”

Disciple: A scholar, sometimes applied to the followers of John the Baptist (Matt. 9:14), and of the Pharisees (22:16), but principally to the followers of Christ. A disciple of Christ is one who (1) believes his doctrine, (2) rests on his sacrifice, (3) imbibes his spirit, and (4) imitates his example (Matt. 10:24; Luke 14:26, 27, 33; John 6:69).<sup>10</sup>

What is the role of discipleship in the Christian life? Is it essential? If so, why? What role do other Christians play in our relationship with God?

The ICOC has a view of discipleship that is at odds with the view commonly held in other mainstream churches. Instead of seeing discipleship and discipling programs as a method or tool for growth, the ICOC views discipleship as a core doctrine of the church, and as a salvation issue. Like other ICOC leaders, in the above-mentioned sermon, the evangelist used Matthew 28:18-20 as a proof text in his sermon. Although this is a very familiar scripture, let's take a look at it:

“Then Jesus came to them and said ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’

The ICOC has received a lot of criticism for their unorthodox interpretation of the Great Commission. To ICOC leaders, it seems straightforward enough. We're to make disciples, not church members. A person has to count the cost and make a decision to become a truly committed disciple of Jesus before they can be baptized. They then repeat the process by going out and making new disciples. At first glance, this makes sense. When I was in the ICOC, I couldn't understand why more churches weren't making disciples the way we were.

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<sup>10</sup> [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)

This is a tricky passage to interpret from the original Greek. On his website, The Barnabas Ministry, John Engler, a former ICOC leader, gives the following explanation.

The Greek verb (imperative mode) "matheteusate" is translated "make disciples" in the English versions.

In English the word "disciple" is a noun only; it has no defined verb meanings (in fact, Greek-English dictionaries define "matheteuo" as "make a disciple of, teach"). This limitation of the English language is central to the difficulty of understanding this passage correctly, as it forces the translator concerned about proper English to translate a Greek verb into an English verb-noun combination. Yet, it is helpful to translate the Greek "matheteusate" as a verb in English, "disciple."

A correct English translation of the text is "make disciples of all nations." "Make disciples" is a verb, "nations" is a noun. There are no "disciples" (noun) in the sentence. "Baptizing" and "teaching to obey" are participles identified as steps in the "discipling" of the nations. This statement is a summary of Jesus' ministry to the apostles and is not intended to be a comprehensive statement concerning conversion or discipling. "The force of the command is to make Jesus' disciples responsible for making disciples of others, a task characterized by baptism and instruction."

Those who are being "baptized" and "taught to obey" are thus "discipled" (verb). "The response of discipleship is baptism and instruction."<sup>11</sup>

A person makes disciples, according to this text, by baptizing and instructing them. The idea that a person must count the cost to be a disciple before he can be baptized is foreign to the text. The ICOC's interpretation of this passage also contradicts numerous other passages.

In the ICOC, discipleship is a foundational issue. What does the Bible say? According to 1 Corinthians 3:5-15, the foundation of the church is of utmost importance. Let's take a look at how Paul built the church:

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder,

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<sup>11</sup> [www.barnabasministry.com](http://www.barnabasministry.com)

and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be show for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

The church in Corinth began as the result of Paul's missionary work. Now, at the writing of this letter, someone else is leading the church and is building on the foundation that Paul had laid. Paul describes himself as an expert builder. If you were going to build a house, you would want to seek out knowledge from an expert. Let's seek out Paul's expertise on how to properly build the church. Verse 11 tells us that Jesus Christ is the foundation. The church cannot be properly built on any other foundation but Christ. In Acts 18, we read about Paul's journey to Corinth. In verse 5, we read that Paul went into the synagogue on every Sabbath, as was his practice, and preached to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. When the Jews rejected the message, Paul went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Look at what happens next.

Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.

Acts 18:8

What message did Paul proclaim in Corinth? In 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul tells us that he was sent to preach the gospel. So what does that entail? What is the gospel? And, just as important, what isn't the gospel?

In 1 Corinthians 1:23, Paul says, "we preach Christ crucified."

Here's another passage from 1 Corinthians that helps to clarify this subject.

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul warns the Corinthians about the "super-apostles," who were in fact false apostles. He says something very interesting in verses 2-4:

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

As an inspired apostle, Paul tells us that anyone who preaches a different gospel or a different Jesus than what he's preaching is preaching falsely.

So the gospel we believe needs to be the same gospel Paul preached, and the Jesus we believe in needs to be the same Jesus he preached. That gives us a guideline to follow. So let's take a deeper look at what Paul preached. In Romans 3:20-24 Paul states the following:

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

Take a close look at the passage. Sometimes, when we've read a scripture many times, we miss some important points, or assume we know what it's saying. We tend to approach scripture with pre-conceived biases, and it's difficult to lay those aside, or even to be aware of our biases. Teachings about commitment and discipleship can make it difficult to understand what Paul's saying because it seems to contradict Jesus' sayings. Christians sometimes feel the need to choose Jesus or Paul when it comes to defining the gospel, because Jesus talks a lot about commitment and Paul talks a lot about grace. It can be hard to reconcile the two approaches, but it's helpful to remember that there was a significant difference in the circumstances in which the two of them preached. Jesus preached to the Jews under the Old Covenant about the coming kingdom of God and revealed himself through his miracles to be the Son of God. While he taught like no one had ever taught and lived like no one had ever lived, we need to ask ourselves what Jesus' purpose was for coming. His purpose was to die for our sins. Paul preached after Jesus' resurrection. Jesus' teaching and Paul's teaching didn't necessarily have the same purpose. We need to be careful when we read the things Jesus said to his disciples. Not everything he said during his earthly ministry was for all believers. As for the gospel that Paul preached, he has the authority of Jesus' words to back him up. In Acts 9, we read of his conversion on the road to Damascus. Jesus appears to Ananias in a vision and sends him to Saul, telling him, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." (Acts 9:15-16). Paul himself says, in Galatians 1:11-

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12, "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."

So, lest we be tempted to pit Jesus against Paul, we need to bear in mind that the gospel Paul preached had Jesus' stamp of approval.

Some of this may make you uncomfortable, but stick with me. The Bible reveals an amazing God with an amazing plan for each of us.

Note what the passage in Romans 3 says about righteousness. A righteousness **APART** from law, has been made known. If I tell you that Tom is a righteous man, what kind of image comes to mind? Someone who is moral? Maybe someone who reads the Bible and prays a lot and is faithful to his wife. Maybe he's a church elder. All of these things may be true of Tom, and are the kind of attributes we would expect of a righteous person, but, according to scripture, a man is not declared righteous in God's sight by his goodness or adherence to a set of rules. This is a hard concept for our minds to grasp, because we want to believe we can earn rewards by being good, and that those who do bad will earn punishment. Of course, the problem is that each of us wants to define what it means to be good, and when we do something wrong, we want mercy, not punishment. But we still want the other guy to be punished, because he really deserves it!

If our deeds don't make us righteous, what does it take? The scripture tells us that righteousness comes from faith in Christ, and is freely given. We have a hard time believing that salvation is really free. Can you imagine if someone gave you a present, you thanked them for it, but every time you turn around, they're reminding you that they gave you a gift and now you owe them? This is what too many of us have done with the gospel. We've turned it into what my minister calls "the semi-Good News." It's a free gift, but not really, because if we emphasize that it's a free gift, people in the pews will become spiritual freeloaders. They won't **DO** anything! That's never the case for those who really understand God's grace. There's no greater motivator in the world than God's amazing gift of his Son, the grace that he lavishly poured out on us. (Ephesians 1:7-8). He wasn't hesitant in giving his gift, thinking to himself, "I'm afraid they won't be grateful. I'd better mix in a few rules to keep them in line." He was lavish when he poured out his grace on us. When was the last time someone **LAVISHED** anything on you, spared no expense, was extravagant? That's our God, wholeheartedly in love with us. Breathtaking, isn't it? We read these scriptures so much and yet can so easily miss the treasure trove of God's goodness embedded within them. Really read through the book of Romans. Take it in. Meditate on it. Pray for God to enlighten your heart.

Note that the passage says that a righteousness **from God** comes through faith in Christ. We do nothing to attain righteousness. Even the righteousness imputed to us by faith is a righteousness that comes from God. We don't earn salvation by having faith. Jesus said that no one can come to him unless the Father draws him (John 14:6). We're dependent on God even for the faith to believe in Christ. Salvation is from God, first to last! He deserves 100% of the glory. We've all sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are

justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Freely. We were saved by Christ's redemption, but how did we appropriate it? It was freely given to us when we believed. But surely we had to count the cost first before our baptism, to make sure we were ready to be totally committed disciples, to make sure we'd fully repented, to make sure we were reading our Bibles daily and were starting to share our faith? I don't read any of that in the Bible. If all of that is necessary before we can be saved, who gets the glory for our salvation? The ICOC's teaching on discipleship adds to the gospel and steals glory away from a holy God. God will share his glory with no one (Isaiah 42:8).

### ***The Pitfalls of Discipleship***

*"You've got to know who to,  
who not to listen to.  
You've got to know who to,  
who not to listen to.  
Oh, you know, they're gonna hit you from all sides,  
better make up your mind  
who to, who not, to listen to.  
Amy Grant, Who to Listen To<sup>12</sup>*

There's an inherent danger in the ICOC's brand of discipleship. Aside from the doctrinal concern I just mentioned, there are three ways that ICOC discipleship can lead, and has led, people from God instead of to God. Let's take a look.

#### **1. Not all discipleship partners are created equal**

This is an issue that was more pronounced under the old discipling tree, when one-over-one discipling was the norm. Peer discipling reduces the problem, but it doesn't eliminate it.

I once had a discipler who referred to the Holy Spirit as "it." I recognized her error and informed her that the Spirit is God himself, a "he," not an "it." Because I knew the Biblical teaching on the Holy Spirit I wasn't harmed by her unbiblical understanding, but what if I hadn't known the truth? What if I had been a young Christian with no background in the Bible? I could have easily been influenced to go down a false biblical path. I once went sharing with a woman in my house church. As we were out I discovered that she didn't believe that Jesus was God! This came as a shock to me, and I discovered later that our house church leaders weren't aware of her beliefs either. I don't recall her discipling anyone, but she could have easily been given a young Christian to disciple, with no one being aware that she held to a dangerous false doctrine.

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<sup>12</sup>Chapman, Gary with Marsh, Tim/Wright, Mark, Songwriters



1 Corinthians deals with an issue that I feel has some application here. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, Paul lays the foundation.

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Paul reminds the Corinthians of the gospel they were taught, and of the testimony of the apostles regarding Christ's resurrection, of which they were witnesses. Paul is reminding them of sound doctrine. In verses 12-14 we find out why this was necessary.

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

Some of the Corinthians were saying there is no resurrection of the dead. The scripture doesn't give us any indication as to how many people in the church had been influenced by this false teaching, but when Paul was made aware of it, he addressed it. It's probably a safe bet that all those who believed this didn't arrive at that conclusion independently. Undoubtedly, they were influenced by others in the church. Look at what Paul says in verses 33-34.

Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character." Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God – I say this to your shame.

The people we spend time with will influence us, for better or worse. If you spend a lot of time with people who are ignorant of God and use his Word incorrectly, what kind of influence will that have on you? James 3:1 says the following:

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

Paul told Timothy the following:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

2 Timothy 2:15

Not all Christians handle the Bible with the same degree of care and discernment. And if someone was disciplined early in their Christian life by someone who passed on incorrect teachings, they've likely absorbed that and will pass it on to others. The problem with instituting mandatory discipling relationships throughout an entire church is the challenge of finding people who are truly qualified to teach and to counsel others. I'm well aware that discipling relationships in the ICOC don't always involve much teaching or counsel. Sometimes, a d-time is nothing more than two friends grabbing a pizza and shooting the breeze. But that's not what the ICOC intends for these relationships. They want iron-sharpening-iron relationships with confession of sin and admonishment. If given a choice of discipleship partners, who are you most likely to choose? More than likely, it's somebody you have a friendship with. People want to spend time with their friends, but friendship and spiritual counsel don't always go hand-in-hand. How qualified is your best friend to really counsel you scripturally? Relationships are so central to ICOC teaching that having a close relationship to someone and knowing a lot about them may be deemed adequate for quality discipling. The ICOC has always loved to pull out scriptures from the Bible detailing close friendships, and holding them up as models for discipling relationships. One of the examples that I remember hearing about a lot was the friendship between David and Jonathan. We read about the closeness of that friendship in 1 Samuel 18:1-4

After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return to his father's house. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.

While this passage paints a portrait of a beautiful friendship, it does not paint a portrait of a discipling relationship. There's no indication that David and Jonathan were spiritually strengthening one another, though it's possible that they were. But we can't take from the scriptures something that isn't there. There were situations in David's life, however, when he needed to be confronted with his sin. After he committed adultery with Bathsheba and conspired to kill her husband, the Lord sent a prophet named Nathan to rebuke him. There's nothing in scripture to indicate that David enjoyed any kind of friendship with Nathan or that he even knew him. The Lord was displeased with David and set about to make it known to him. God has ways of getting our attention. We don't need a discipleship structure to know when we've sinned. In 1 Chronicles 21, when David sinned by counting his fighting men, God sends another prophet, Gad, to David, to tell him the punishment that God was going to inflict. Gad is described as David's "seer." A seer is the same thing as a prophet, according to 1 Samuel 9:9. When David needed to inquire of the Lord, he would go to Gad. If you really strained, you might see a hint of a discipling relationship here, but that's a pretty big stretch. When the prophets spoke to the kings of Israel, they spoke to them the very words of God. If the prophet was truly sent by God, his words were not his own. He didn't give advice based on his own wisdom. He only passed on what God told him, nothing any of us could claim today. Also, we have

direct access to God because of Jesus' sacrifice, and don't need a prophet to inquire of the Lord for us.

When David needed counsel, it was from a righteous man who heard directly from God. They may have had a friendship or they may not have had a friendship. The Bible doesn't tell us, which seems to indicate that it isn't relevant to what God wanted us to know. The prophets, for the most part (Balaam is an obvious exception), were loyal and obedient to God. They warned the people, on God's behalf, when they strayed off course. Obedience to God and faithfulness to him was of the highest importance, more so than any human relationship.

Friendships are great, but they aren't a substitute for godly counsel from wise people. If you have a good friend who is also godly and wise, and uses scripture properly, that's a blessing, but for everyone in a church to find both in one relationship is highly unlikely.

Disciples not only pass on their doctrinal beliefs; they also pass on their values. I remember sitting in a leaders meeting once, and a young female leader shared that she had learned something new. She learned that when you ask somebody how they're doing and they say, "Okay," they're not **really** okay. So, she learned, through discipling, not to trust the people she disciplined. She learned to view other Christians as dishonest and trying to hide things. That's a pretty big generalization to make about people, and a sad way to view your brothers and sisters in Christ. It's a dangerous thing to view everyone through the same narrow lens. A lot of abuse occurred due to that kind of thinking. I once had a discipler who talked about the need to reach out to "sharp" people. These were the kinds of people that were typically raised up into leadership in the ICOC, regardless of spirituality. A lot of people were hurt by that worldly approach, as people who were woefully unqualified to lead others gave worldly, foolish advice and, all too often, were simply mimicking the things they were taught by their disciplers.

People communicate their spiritual beliefs and values through discipling. What has been communicated to you through discipling and what have you communicated to others?

## **2. ICOC discipling steals intimacy from one's relationship with God**

Dictionary.com gives the following definition for intimacy:

*A close, familiar, and usually affectionate or loving personal relationship with another person or group.*

Humans have a longing for intimacy. We hear of babies suffering permanent damage as a result of not being held. Children who don't bond with their parents have a very difficult time in life. My husband had a boss whose parents both died when he was young. He was raised in an orphanage, and was a cold, mean adult with terrible social skills. Women will sometimes become promiscuous in order to seek intimacy.

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The ICOC has always understood the strong human need for relationship and touch. Close, interpersonal relationships can be difficult to find, even at church, and the ICOC has taken advantage of that. The most striking thing that stood out to me at my first ICOC service was how friendly everyone was. People seemed to really care about me and wanted to spend time with me. It made me feel special. I've heard ICOC leaders say that disciples need a certain number of friendships in the church in order to stay faithful. As a member, I heard numerous messages on discipling. There was nearly always a focus in these messages on having a close friendship with your discipleship partner.

Openness with others was highly stressed, openness referring to vulnerability, including, but not limited to, confession of sin to one another. In his recent sermon on discipleship, the evangelist said that there should be one person who knows everything about you, not including your spouse. We were called sinful for being "independent." I don't see the term "independent" listed as a sin in the Bible, but when I was in the ICOC, it was deeply frowned upon to not be close to other disciples.

It's easy to convince people of the rightness of this teaching. The New Testament has numerous scriptures regarding the love that Christians should have for one another. Jesus himself said in John 13:34-35 that we were to love one another, and that our love for each other is a sign of discipleship. 1 John 3:11-20 talks about the importance of loving each other with actions and in truth.

I'm not denying the value of close friendships or the imperative to love other Christians. I'm also not denying that many congregations are weak in this area. So, before I proceed, let me just say for the record that I'm not anti-relationship. What I am against is any relationship or system that takes priority over, or pulls us away from, God. I believe that ICOC discipleship has done that.

### *Intimacy with God*

God created us to need intimacy, not only with each other, but, first and foremost, with him. Prior to the fall, Adam and Eve enjoyed intimacy with God. Genesis tells us that God walked in the garden in the cool of the day. They spoke to God and he spoke to them. Once they sinned they hid from God, and, as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, we continue to hide.

We see the Jews throughout the Old Testament relating to God through the law. Only the High Priest could enter the most Holy Place, and that only once a year. The priests made sacrifices before God on behalf of the people to atone for their sins. But in Hebrews we see the futility and emptiness of that system; we also see that Jesus had a better way.

When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the

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Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings – external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

Hebrews 9:6-10

Let's stop for a moment to look at something in this passage. Verse 9 tells us that the gifts and sacrifices that were offered didn't have the power to cleanse the consciences of those who offered them. Hebrews 10:1-2 adds some clarification.

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.

Have you substituted a shadow for the reality of Christ's sacrifice? I spent several years on the hamster wheel of performance trying to please God and draw near to him, but my gifts and sacrifices didn't cleanse my conscience. Nothing will steal intimacy with God like guilt. If you're worn out from running on the hamster wheel and are ready to jump off, read on:

When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time, he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

Hebrews 9:11-14; 10:11-14

Jesus is both the High Priest and the sacrifice. He offered himself as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Look at Hebrews 10:14. When we place our faith in

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Christ, we're justified before God (made perfect), and begin the process, through the power of the Holy Spirit, of becoming like Christ (being made holy).

Are you relying on your own sacrifices, made again and again, resulting in fatigue, guilt and spiritual insecurity, or are you relying on the one sacrifice that truly cleanses your conscience, now able to approach the throne of grace with confidence (Hebrews 4:16)?

According to Matthew 27:51, when Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. That corresponds with what we just read. We can now approach God because Jesus our High Priest has opened the way through his own blood. The intimacy with God that was lost in Eden has been restored.

How does this tie into discipleship? I believe that ICOC discipleship steals intimacy with God, intimacy that Jesus bought back for us, and I believe this occurs primarily through "openness."

### *Confession of sin*

One of the core ICOC teachings in discipleship is the necessity of confessing of sins to another Christian. They base this belief on a misinterpretation of James 5:16, which says:

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

Based on that scripture, the ICOC teaches its members to confess their sins to others (a discipleship partner, if there is one), not to be forgiven, but to be healed. We were taught that our hearts would become hardened if we didn't confess. Confession was such a part of the ICOC culture that if a leader mentioned confession in a sermon, it was assumed that he was referring not to confessing our sins to God, but to each other.

We always need to look at scriptures in context. Let's read James 5:13-17.

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.

This section of scripture is about the importance and power of prayer. The direction to confess sins in 5:16, in its context, is related to illness. To create a doctrine of confession based on this scripture is to misinterpret and misapply the scripture. That's not to say that

confession of sin to other Christians is never appropriate. If you've sinned against someone, you need to go to them and confess, ask forgiveness and be reconciled (Matthew 5:23-24). We also read in Acts 19:18 about people in Ephesus who came to faith and openly confessed their evil deeds. There's nothing in scripture to indicate that they were commanded to do this. It appears that they did it out of their personal conviction. The concern I have is with mandatory confession and accountability. Confession that stems from an honest relationship with a fellow Christian can help you to grow. But it's important that it occur in an atmosphere of freedom, in which God is our number one relationship.

So how does this steal intimacy from God? I'm going through an experience in my own life that may shed some light on this topic. I moved nine months ago. I live about sixty miles from my previous home. My husband and I have bought a townhouse and have a new church home. My husband has a new job, which he really likes. If you've ever moved any distance, you know how difficult it can be to get to know new people. If you don't have family nearby, as we don't, the situation is compounded. The short version: I'm lonely. The people at our new church are very kind, and I'm slowly getting to know some of them, but haven't really made any friends, and sometimes it gets to me. Today was one of those days. Loneliness gripped my heart and I experienced some emotional pain. And you know the danger that comes with that pain. The temptation is to be angry at other people for not meeting your needs and to become resentful and self-pitying. I've just started a study on perseverance, appropriately enough, and I sat down and read a couple of chapters in Job this morning. After I finished my reading, a couple of scripture references came to mind, so I looked them up. Proverbs 10:12 says the following:

Hatred stirs up dissension  
but love covers all wrongs.

This scripture was perfect for me this morning and acted as a warning for me to guard my heart. The second scripture reference was 1 John 3, which talks about loving your brothers. There's a warning in 1 John 3:12 to not be like Cain, who murdered his brother. You'll recall that in Genesis 4:7 God told Cain to do what is right, and warned him that sin was crouching at his door. We face these crossroads frequently in our lives and have to choose whether to trust God or chase after sin. 1 John 3 gave me clear direction to love my brothers and sisters in Christ as Christ loved us. He laid down his life for us, and that's the kind of love I need to show other Christians, rather than resent them for not meeting my friendship needs. Then another scripture reference came to mind, and this pulled it all together, and is relevant to the topic at hand. Psalm 62 contrasts the trustworthiness of God with the untrustworthiness of man. Even the best-intentioned and godliest of people will let you down. But look at this passage from Psalm 62.

Find rest, O my soul, in God  
alone;  
my hope comes from him.  
He alone is my rock and my  
salvation,

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he is my fortress, I will not be  
shaken.  
My salvation and my honor  
depend on God;  
he is my mighty rock, my  
refuge.  
Trust in him at all times,  
O people;  
pour out your hearts to him,  
for God is our refuge.  
Psalm 62:5-8

Friendship is a good thing, but not at the expense of my intimacy with God. Do you see what he's telling us in this psalm? There are needs in my soul that only God can meet, but I'm trying to get them met by people. My identity, my worth, my security – all of these needs are met by God. Until I surrender this area of my life to God and allow him to heal my heart and be for me all that he desires to be, I'll be insecure and frustrated at the inability to build friendships. My personal belief is that God will frustrate my plans **until** I surrender to him. I need to give to God what belongs to God (my heart); then I'll be equipped to have healthy friendships, the kind of friendships that will strengthen my relationship with God rather than hinder it. I still need to love my brothers and sisters; pray for them; look for needs to meet. But when it comes to making a great friend, I'll put that in God's hands and leave the timing up to him.

I love how Psalm 62 instructs us to pour out our hearts to God. There's something about pouring out a lonely, hurting heart to God. It builds intimacy. It's okay to feel like all your emotional needs aren't being met, if it leads you to God. If you approached a discipleship partner in the ICOC and told them you were sad and lonely because you lacked deep friendships, what kind of advice would be given? Would that advice lead you closer to the heart of God?

There will always be a danger in relationships interfering with closeness to God. Discipling increases the odds of this happening. If you have a discipleship partner who knows "everything about you," that person will quickly become God's rival for your affections. When you're struggling with sin or feeling down, who do you turn to first? The ICOC teaches that forgiveness of sin comes from God, but we need to confess to one another in order to be healed. So we seek forgiveness from God, but not healing? Do you see the lack of closeness and intimacy with God that this implies?

I also love the way God is referred to in this psalm, and in others, as a refuge. God is our hiding place to whom we can always run when the storms of life are howling. I went to the park yesterday morning to pray. There's a creek that runs alongside the park. I was able to walk through a gate and walk down to the creek. I sat down on a rock and spent time with God. I peered through an opening in the trees and watched a bird with large wings fly by. I was really glad that it was just myself and God sharing that special moment. I didn't have anything weighing heavily on my heart at the time. I just wanted to



worship God. But if I had needed to really pour out my heart to him, it still would have been special; maybe more so.

There's nothing more special than spending time with my heavenly Father. May no human relationship ever interfere with that.

### **3. ICOC discipling usurps the role of the Holy Spirit**

I read an interesting scripture this morning. I knew I wanted to write about this topic and asked the Lord for guidance. Leviticus 24 immediately came to mind, which was quite puzzling. I was tempted to ignore the thought, as I couldn't see how anything in Leviticus could pertain to this topic, but I didn't want to miss anything the Holy Spirit might be trying to show me, so I opened my Bible and read the following verses:

The Lord said to Moses, "Command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of pressed olives for the light so that the lamp may be kept burning continually. Outside the curtain of the Testimony in the Tent of Meeting, Aaron is to tend the lamps before the Lord from evening till morning, continually. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. The lamps in the pure gold lampstand before the Lord must be tended continually.

Leviticus 24:1-4

Have you ever scratched your head over some of the commands God gave the Israelites under the Old Covenant sacrificial system? Have you ever asked yourself, "Why did he have them do that?" What purpose was there in keeping the lamps burning, or to even have lamps in the first place? The people were expected to trust the Lord and obey his commands, regardless of whether they understood them or not. And it may have made sense to them in their cultural context in a way it doesn't to us. One thing we can clearly take away from this passage is that God wanted those lamps burning continually. This was emphasized three times in the passage.

We have a great advantage in living after the time of Christ and having a completed Bible. We can appreciate the symbolism in the Old Testament, and the applications they have in the church age. In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John relates how, while in the Spirit, he was called to address seven churches. In Revelation 1:12-16 we read the following:

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth

came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

In the verses following, we learn that the one “like a son of man” is Jesus, and Jesus reveals that the seven stars are the seven angels of the churches and the seven lampstands are the churches themselves. The symbolism here is pretty straightforward. The purpose of a lampstand is to hold a lamp, or lamps, that will give off light. Jesus said that we are the light of the world. It’s our mission in this world to shine the light of Christ, and the church is the people of God. So the church shines in a dark world, beckoning people to its light.

Where does the light come from? Revelation 21 gives us a vision of the new heaven and the new earth. John saw the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven, like a beautiful bride dressed for her husband. We read in verse 23:

The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.

Jesus is the light that shines within us, through his Spirit. Our responsibility is to allow him to shine. In Revelation 2:1-7, he gives a warning to the church in Ephesus to repent of its sins. In verse 5, Jesus tells them that if they don’t repent he’ll remove their lampstand from its place. Jesus has authority over the church, which was bought with his blood. If the lamp is not putting out light, what good is the lampstand?

A group of people can gather together in Jesus’ name, but that doesn’t make it a church in God’s sight. They need to be a “lampstand” in God’s sight, putting out light. Jesus emphasizes the importance of this concept in Matthew 25, in the parable of the ten virgins. To summarize, ten virgins took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. The five foolish virgins took their lamps, but didn’t bring any extra oil, so when the bridegroom was delayed in coming, their lamps went out and they couldn’t get oil in time to make it into the banquet. The five wise virgins brought extra oil and were ready when the bridegroom arrived.

We don’t have to understand all the cultural details that inform this story to get the point. The light that we were given at our conversion needs to continue to shine until the very end. This is so important that we’ll miss out on the wedding banquet of the Lamb if our lights go out.

What does all this have to do with discipling? In the ICOC, the purpose of discipling is to help people live as obedient disciples and make it to heaven. According to the verses we just read, we need to make sure our spiritual light doesn’t go out. What does that look like? In Ephesians 5:18, Paul gives the Ephesians the following command from God:

Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.

Okay. How do we obey this verse? The first part is simple enough. Don't get drunk. We all have control over whether we get drunk or not. But the second part is a bit different. Be filled with the Spirit. Can you imagine a Discipleship Group leader giving you this direction: "Make sure the people you disciple are full of the Spirit?" In the ICOC, people often pass along advice they've received from others. It looks something like this: "I was told not to get drunk anymore and was held accountable on a daily basis by my discipleship partner. This person I'm in a discipling relationship with is struggling with the same thing, so I'll give her the same direction I was given." I don't think anyone's ever told me how to be full of the Spirit. To smile? Yes. To give hugs? Yes. To be "out of myself?" Yes. But to be full of the Spirit? That's an internal thing. How do you disciple someone to be full of the Spirit? Tempting as it may be to sidestep that question, it's a command in scripture and discipling partners are supposed to help each other be obedient and make it to heaven. So you're forced to pick and choose what commands to help each other obey, to only deal with the things you can see and the things you can measure. I was always taught that partial obedience wasn't really obedience. So, if you're going to be honest, you can't sidestep the issue of the Holy Spirit. How do we get filled with the Holy Spirit? Do we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit? Yes, if we want to be obedient to God. So how do you help another Christian be full of the Spirit? In the parable of the ten virgins, the foolish virgins asked the wise virgins to give them some of their oil, because their lamps were going out. The wise virgins refused, because if they gave the foolish virgins some of their oil, they might not have enough. So they sent the foolish virgins to the people who sell oil, and the foolish virgins didn't make it to the banquet in time. A discipleship partner can't fill you with the Spirit because it isn't his or hers to give. You have to go to the source.

Let's think about the nature of being filled. An item is affected and changed by what fills it. If a drinking glass is filled with water, it can function in the way it was intended to function. If it's filled with nails, it no longer functions as a drinking glass, unless you remove the nails and replace them with a drinkable liquid. If a person is filled with anger, or lust, or fear, it takes control over that individual and affects every area of his life. As someone who has struggled with anxiety disorders, I can relate to this. Every thought, every word, every action, becomes tainted by that which controls that person. When you see a person who's full of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit controls every thought, word, and action of that person and leaves an imprint on everyone around them.

How does a person who is filled with anger become that way? It may have started as a reaction to a perceived injustice, and over time, the anger grows and builds, and eventually consumes and controls the person. We see this principle in action when somebody develops an addiction to pornography. Their lustful desires lead them to look at pornography for the first time. The pleasure they receive from this action causes their lust to grow, so they look at pornography again, and then again, and they're soon hooked. Their own sinful desires began the process, but they made a choice to yield to those desires again and again and allowed them to take control.

In the same way, we can't be filled with the Holy Spirit without yielding ourselves to him so that he can take control. He won't force us to do it. We have to make the decision.

This goes against the grain of discipling. In discipling relationships, the disciples typically give each other specific tasks to perform in order to help them grow, and then hold them accountable for it. It could be a 60-minute daily quiet time; it could be daily confession of sin; it could be doing something to serve someone on a weekly basis. None of these are bad ideas, but, in and of themselves, they won't lead to us being filled with the Holy Spirit, and it's the Spirit that transforms us into the likeness of Jesus. They can actually interfere by causing us to focus on good deeds as a way to grow close to God and to grow more like Jesus, when God is calling us to surrender to him, so he can live his life through us. The good deeds will come as a natural result of the filling of the Spirit, but it doesn't work in reverse.

This leads to a discussion about trust and dependence. Discipling usurps the role of the Holy Spirit by encouraging you to misplace your trust, and depend on man instead of the Spirit. If this were not the case, the ICOC would not tell its members that they wouldn't make it to heaven without discipling. Isn't that the very definition of spiritual dependence? You can't place your trust in both God and man. You have to make a choice. You can't be filled with the Holy Spirit without yielding to him, and you can't yield to the Holy Spirit while your trust is in man. You can't depend on the Holy Spirit to transform you into the image of Christ if you're depending on discipleship partners to "get you to heaven." Does the Holy Spirit need help in sanctifying you? Is he not qualified for the job?

The ICOC's lack of trust in God and his power is evident. The focus on outward deeds is the evidence. They don't trust that a person who has truly put their faith in Christ will be transformed by the inner working of the Holy Spirit, and show it by their deeds. The ICOC wants to control the process itself through a discipleship system. And that leads to my final point.

The ICOC discipling system usurps the role of the Holy Spirit through human control. I had an experience with the Holy Spirit as an ICOC member that I'll never forget. We had some sort of conference, and after the conclusion of the conference, I experienced a filling of the Spirit. This was a rare occurrence for me in the ICOC. It lasted for a week. I was filled with joy and peace. I found it easy to say "no" to sin. I didn't even desire to sin. I didn't just invite people to church. I had good spiritual conversations with people, even with people I would normally have felt intimidated by. At the end of the week, our sector leader called a meeting for those of us in the Marrieds Without Kids ministry. At the meeting, he talked about the conference and what he got out of it. He then went on to tell us all the things we were going to do as a ministry. Do you know what happened to me during that meeting? That filling of the Spirit I had experienced – vanished. I didn't lose the Holy Spirit, but I no longer experienced his filling and powerful presence. He had been quenched. Why? I didn't have any issues with the things the sector leader talked about and wanted us to do. I was on-board with it. I didn't have an attitude toward him. But there was a problem with what he was doing. The activities he had planned out for us were mandatory. In 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 we read:

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“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces, all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. If you want to see the power of the Holy Spirit, you'll see it in an atmosphere of freedom. Human control, by a church leader, by a discipleship partner, by a concerned friend, is anathema to the Holy Spirit. He wants control of your life. He won't share that control with others. He won't force you to give him control. You have to offer it to him, but you can't do that in an environment where you've given some of your freedom over to men. You can only give control to the Spirit if you're free.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Galatians 5:1

When I left the ICOC, the church was in a state of flux and confusion. We didn't have discipling partners anymore and the use of statistics for accountability had been discontinued. People didn't know what to do with their freedom and floundered. Some people wanted to go back to accountability because people weren't “doing anything.” Perhaps you've heard the same argument or have even made it yourself. This shows that the ICOC is more concerned with “doing” than with “being.” The answer to spiritual lethargy is not accountability, it's the filling of the Holy Spirit. You can choose human control or Spirit control, but the two can't co-exist. It's like mixing oil and water.

The control of man or the control of the Spirit. Which will it be?

## **Ungodly Leadership: Tolerating the Intolerable**

The Lord gave me an interesting scripture to ponder. Jeremiah 14 is a very sobering prophecy about Judah. The Lord sends Jeremiah to warn his people about impending calamity. In verse 12, the Lord warns his people, “Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will destroy them with the sword, famine and plague.” This is an urgent message, yet in verse 11, we’re informed that God has told Jeremiah not to pray for their well-being! God had to have been most upset to have given this direction to Jeremiah. What did Judah do that was so grievous that God wouldn’t even allow his prophet to pray for them? We’re told in verse 10.

This is what the Lord says about this people:

“They greatly love to wander;  
they do not restrain their  
feet.  
So the Lord does not accept  
them;  
he will now remember their  
wickedness  
and punish them for their sins.

Idolatry, and its attendant immorality, had been a snare for the Israelites ever since Moses led them out of Egypt. God raised up numerous prophets to warn his people again and again to repent of their unfaithfulness, yet they were stiff-necked and proud and refused to listen. This brings up the issue of leadership and the role it played in Israel’s decline.

When they were slaves in Egypt and cried out to God for deliverance, he raised up Moses to lead them out of their bondage. Moses was a righteous man. The Lord spoke to him face to face (Exodus 33:11). According to Numbers 12:3 he was the most humble man on the face of the earth. While he was on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the people became impatient with his long absence, and Aaron made for them an idol in the form of a calf and encouraged the people to worship it. When Moses returned and saw that the people had become corrupted, he responded immediately. He burned the calf, ground it to powder, and made the Israelites drink it (Exodus 32:19-20). He then called the people to make a choice of whom they would serve and called out to God on their behalf.

There’s much we can learn about leadership from the life of Moses. First of all, Moses didn’t seek glory for himself. When God called him to rescue Israel from the Egyptians, Moses didn’t say, “I’m your man Lord. You know, I grew up in Egypt as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter! You definitely chose the right guy.” From a human perspective, he does indeed seem to be a good choice. He was an Israelite, he knew the language of the Egyptians, was well-educated, knew a lot about the royal family. But none of those things gave Moses confidence. He was painfully aware of his weaknesses and was fearful and

overwhelmed with God's call for his life. But he obeyed and did what God called him to do, relying on the Lord's power to get the job done. He didn't try to play the part of a powerful leader. He knew he was in over his head and turned to God repeatedly for direction. Secondly, Moses had a reverent fear of God. He didn't make things up as he went. He listened to God's voice and followed his instructions, and when the people rebelled, he cried out to God for help. He knew God was holy and he didn't take the sins of the people lightly. When God threatened to destroy the people, Moses interceded on their behalf because he was concerned about God's reputation among the other nations.

In the years following Moses' death, both during the time of the judges and the time of the kings, there were many godly leaders and many ungodly leaders as well. The godly leaders enacted reforms that kept Israel's propensity toward idolatry in check. The ungodly leaders actively promoted idolatry and even led the way, as was the case with Ahab, aided and abetted by his wicked wife Jezebel. According to 1 Kings 16:30, Ahab did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any other king before him. Let's take a look at Ahab's life and leadership to get a picture of what an evil ruler looks like:

He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him.

1 Kings 16:31-33

Ahab didn't just tolerate idolatry. He actively promoted it and participated in it. There's a very telling verse in I Kings 16 that will help us understand how evil leaders operate. In verse 31, we read that Ahab considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam. Jeroboam was a previous king who had set a new low standard for Israel to follow. He was not born into royalty. He was selected by King Solomon to be in charge of the labor force of the house of Joseph in building supporting terraces. One day, Jeroboam was approached by a prophet named Ahijah. Ahijah was wearing a new cloak, which he proceeded to tear into twelve pieces.

"Then he said to Jeroboam, 'Take ten pieces for yourself, for this is what the Lord, the God of Israel says: 'See, I am going to tear the kingdom out of Solomon's hand and give you ten tribes. But for the sake of my servant David and the city of Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, he will have one tribe. I will do this because they have forsaken me and worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of the Ammonites, and have not walked in my ways, nor done what is right in my eyes, nor kept my statutes, and laws as David, Solomon's father, did.'"

1 Kings 11:31-33

God goes on to reveal to Jeroboam that he will give him ten tribes. He tells Jeroboam that he is going to be king over Israel, and if he does what is right, he will be with him.

In 1 Kings 12 we see the fulfillment of Ahijah's prophecy. After Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam becomes king of Israel, but a foolish decision causes him to lose most of Israel, which then proceeds to make Jeroboam king. In accordance with God's prophecy, Rehoboam still rules over Judah, because he's from David's line. We now have a divided kingdom, which was not God's original intent for his people. The Lord's hand directs all of these events in response to the sin of his people.

Jeroboam was not a godly leader. 1 Kings 12 reveals his insecurity and lack of trust in God. Because he feared that the people would abandon him and return to following Rehoboam if they went up to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices, he made two golden calves for the people to sacrifice to. He engaged in a number of religious practices that did not conform to the law that God had given Moses. He made it up as he went, and it became a snare for the people.

In 1 Kings 14, Ahijah gives the following prophecy to Jeroboam's wife:

Go, tell Jeroboam that this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'I raised you up from among the people and made you a leader over my people Israel. I tore the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it to you, but you have not been like my servant David, who kept my commands and followed me with all his heart, doing only what was right in my eyes. You have done more evil than all who lived before you. You have made for yourself other gods, idols made of metal; you have provoked me to anger and thrust me behind your back.

'Because of this, I am going to bring disaster on the house of Jeroboam. I will cut off from Jeroboam every last male in Israel—slave or free. I will burn up the house of Jeroboam as one burns dung, until it is all gone. Dogs will eat those belonging to Jeroboam who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country. The Lord has spoken!'

### *The Legacy of Jeroboam*

As we go back and consider the reign of Ahab, I want to discuss an important dynamic of leadership. The following scriptures are very telling:

Nadab son of Jeroboam became king of Israel in the second year of Asa king of Judah, and he reigned over Israel two years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, **walking in the ways of his father and in his sin, which he had caused Israel to commit.** (bolding mine)

1 Kings 15:25-26



In the third year of Asa king of Judah Baasha son of Ahijah became king of all Israel in Tirzah, and he reigned twenty-four years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, **walking in the ways of Jeroboam and in his sin, which he had caused Israel to commit.** (bolding mine)

1 Kings 15:33-34

In the twenty-seventh year of Asa king of Judah, Zimri reigned in Tirzah seven days...When Zimri saw that the city was taken, he went into the citadel of the royal palace and set the palace on fire around him. So he died, because of the sins he had committed, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord and **walking in the ways of Jeroboam and in the sin he had committed and had caused Israel to commit.** (bolding mine)

1 Kings 16:15a, 18-19

Then the people of Israel were split into two factions; half supported Tibiri Son of Ginath for king, and the other half supported Omri. But Omri's followers proved stronger than those of Tibiri Son of Ginath. So Tibirit died and Omri became king. But Omri did evil in the eyes of the Lord and sinned more than all those before him. **He walked in all the ways of Jeroboam son of Nebat and in his sin, which he had caused Israel to commit,** so that they provoked the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger by their worthless idols. (bolding mine)

1 Kings 16:21-26

The next king after Omri was Ahab, and as we've already seen, he took Jeroboam's sins to a new level. 1 Kings 16:31 tells us that Ahab considered it a trivial matter to commit the sins of Jeroboam. It's easy to do the things that others who came before you did. With each passing generation, as the sin goes unchallenged, hearts get harder and harder and what was once horrible and shocking now seems trivial. Any of the kings who reigned between Jeroboam and Ahab could have chosen to do what is right, but it's easier to continue sinning and to justify it by saying, "That's how it's always been done." There were occasions under the Old Covenant when good kings arose from amid a sea of bad kings and ruled righteously. Let's take a look at one of them.

### ***Josiah's Reforms***

Unlike the other kings we've looked at, who ruled over Israel, Josiah ruled Judah in the divided kingdom. After Rehoboam, the kings who reigned over Judah are as follows:

Abijah – did evil in the eyes of the Lord (1 Kings 13)

Asa – did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (1 Kings 15)

Jehoshaphat – did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (1 Kings 22)

Jehoram – did evil in the eyes of the Lord (2 Kings 8)

Ahaziah – did evil in the eyes of the Lord (2 Kings 8)

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Joash – did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (2 Kings 12)

Amaziah – did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (2 Kings 14)

Azariah – did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (2 Kings 15)

Jotham – did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (2 Kings 15)

Ahaz – did evil in the eyes of the Lord (2 Kings 16)

Israel exiled (2 Kings 17)

Hezekiah – did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (2 Kings 18)

Manasseh – did evil in the eyes of the Lord (2 Kings 21)

Amon – did evil in the eyes of the Lord (2 Kings 21)

When you look at this list, a couple of things stand out. You rarely see a good king or bad king for just one generation. You see at least two succeeding generations of either one. Also, notice the wording repeatedly used. The kings either did what was right in the eyes of the Lord or they did evil in the eyes of the Lord. What is evil in the eyes of the Lord may be seen as acceptable, or even desirable in the eyes of the people. A godly leader is more concerned with being acceptable to God than with being acceptable to people.

When the Bible refers to a king doing what is right it's generally referring to the removal of idols. Leading the people to fidelity to God, to being holy, or set apart, is a vital role of leadership. God's people didn't want to be set apart. They wanted to be like the nations around them. Part of spiritual leadership is helping people to fix their focus upon God and not the world. Most of the good kings only enacted partial reforms. They removed many of the idols but not all of them. Jehoshaphat, Joash, Amaziah, Azariah and Jotham all failed to remove the high places in Judah. The high places mentioned in the Old Testament refers to a raised altar or hilltop shrine. Some of the Israelite high places combined worship of the true God with Canaanite fertility rites<sup>13</sup>; therefore, the high places became a snare for God's people.

According to 2 Kings 18, Hezekiah **did** remove the high places. Look at how he's described:

Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him.  
2 Kings 18:5

Hezekiah didn't just follow in the footsteps of the other kings; he went the "extra mile." Unfortunately, the positive changes didn't last long. After his death, his son Manasseh became king. He erected altars to various idols and rebuilt the high places. 2 Kings 21:6 says he did much evil. Manasseh reigned for 55 years. His son Amon succeeded him, but only reigned for two years before he was assassinated. His son Josiah succeeded him as king, at the age of eight.

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<sup>13</sup> [www.newworldencyclopedia.org](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org)

In the 18<sup>th</sup> year of his reign he sent the secretary to the temple to take care of some financial matters (2 Kings 22), and while the secretary was there, he was informed by the high priest that the Book of the Law had been found! How far from God had the people of Judah drifted that the Book of the Law had been lost? What an ignorant generation that must have been. But look at Josiah's reaction when he was given the news:

When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes.  
2 Kings 22:11

He inquires of the Lord and discovers that the Lord is planning to bring disaster on them, but because Josiah had a humble, responsive heart, he was promised that the disaster would not occur in his lifetime.

Josiah took God's words to heart and set about making extensive reforms. Here's a list of the things he did:

- He read the Book of the Law to the people and had them pledge to renew the covenant.
- He removed the idolatrous articles from the temple and burned them.
- He did away with the pagan priests.
- He took the Asherah pole that was in the temple and burned it.
- He tore down the quarters of the male shrine prostitutes.
- He desecrated the high places.
- He broke down the shrines at the gates.
- He desecrated Topheth so no one could sacrifice his son or daughter to Molech.
- He removed the horses from the entrance to the temple that had been dedicated to the sun.
- He burned the chariots dedicated to the sun.
- He pulled down the altars the kings had erected on the roof near the upper room of Ahaz.
- He pulled down the altar Manasseh had built in the two courts of the temple and smashed them.
- He desecrated the high places east of Jerusalem.
- He smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles and covered the sites with human bones.
- He demolished the altar at Bethel, the high place made by Jeroboam.
- He had bones removed from their tombs and burned them on the altar to defile it.
- He removed and defiled all the shrines at the high places in Samaria.
- He slaughtered the priests of these high places.
- He commanded the people to celebrate the Passover.
- He got rid of the mediums and spiritists, the household gods and the idols.

As you can see, Josiah's reforms were very thorough. It's sobering to see how steeped in idolatry Judah had become. This shows the importance of godly leadership and the

dangers of partial reform. When idolatry is tolerated, even in a small degree, it presents a very real spiritual danger.

Despite Josiah's efforts, the Lord didn't turn away from his anger (2 Kings 23:26). Jeremiah 3:6-10 explains why:

During the reign of King Josiah, the Lord said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. **In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense," declares the Lord.** (bolding mine)

Do you see what they were doing? They were playing "follow the leader." If the leader did evil, they followed him into evil. If the leader did what was righteous, they followed him in doing what was righteous, but only externally. Their righteous deeds were external, not heartfelt, because, whether they were following an evil leader or a righteous leader, they were putting their trust in man, not God, so even if they did what was right, they couldn't please God, who knew their hearts. At heart, they were still devoted to their idols. That's why none of the reforms that the good kings undertook ever "stuck." God is not fooled by our external obedience. They had been idolatrous for years, and the idols were only removed, temporarily, when they had a righteous king. Where were the convictions of God's people? They were told in Deuteronomy to impress God's laws on their children so they wouldn't forget, but they had obviously stopped doing that long before, and they were susceptible to the practices of the nations around them.

God knew the people of Judah were just following the leader. What about you? Have you ever played "follow the leader?" I have, and the results weren't good.

## **Destruction of the Proud**

God will not tolerate pride. Pride is the one sin that God actively opposes throughout the Bible. The proud man is one who is defiant before God. Here are a few scriptures that show God's attitude toward pride:

The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.  
Proverbs 16:5

To fear the Lord is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.

Proverbs 8:13

The story of Nebuchadnezzar is a good illustration for us to consider. In Daniel 4 we read of a dream that Nebuchadnezzar had, which Daniel interpreted. He dreamt of an enormous tree with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit. A holy messenger called for the tree to be cut down. Daniel explained to the king, with no small amount of trepidation, I'm sure, that the dream applied to him. In Daniel 4:24-26 we read:

"This is the interpretation, O King, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my Lord the King: You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes. The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules."

A year later the dream was fulfilled. Apparently, the king failed to take heed of what Daniel told him, because in verse 30 of Daniel 4, the King says, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"

Immediately, his kingdom and authority were stripped from him and he was driven away from people to live like an animal. What a fall from grace! I wonder if those proud words uttered by King Nebuchadnezzar were said to someone else who was with him or if he muttered it to himself. We just read in Proverbs 16:5 that the Lord detests all the proud "in heart." Pride doesn't have to be overt to meet God's resistance. He sees the secrets of our hearts.

I remember pride being joked about in the ICOC. Certain leaders referred to themselves as "prideful dogs," in an almost boastful manner. I'm not entirely sure how ICOC leaders viewed pride. People were often labeled as prideful for simply disagreeing with a leader, an accusation which actually displays a lot of arrogance. Given the deference showed to the leaders, the ICOC environment bred arrogance in its leaders. Instead of servant-leadership we had a church in which members served the leaders to a disproportionate extent. Throw in excessive authority and you've got a recipe for disaster. The dangerous thing about pride is its deceptive nature. We have a hard time seeing it in ourselves, and in an environment where challenging leaders, or even gently correcting leaders, is frowned upon, it was a real pitfall.

Pride was manifested in the ICOC at every level and in many ways. It was displayed through authoritarian leadership, even at the Bible Talk level. I once had a Bible Talk leader who called our group together to talk about how we were doing. We met at the beach, then planned to watch the Chargers play the Steelers in the AFC Championship game. We were in San Diego, so the game was a big deal for our city. During the meeting, our leader showed displeasure with our spirituality, and said, "We don't have to watch the football game." He was unhappy with us and, as a result, threatened to keep us

there for hours, causing us to miss the game. He didn't make good on his threat, but it was arrogant of him to think he had the authority to do it.

We were so sure of ourselves that were insensitive to the feelings of others. My husband once called out his discipler on his lack of sensitivity toward a man he was studying the Bible with, and he responded by saying, "You can't chase away a true disciple." When I was single, our Bible Talk leaders planned a surprise for our Bible Talk. The women had a sleepover at the female leader's house and the men had a sleepover at the male leader's house. When we got up on Saturday morning we were informed that we were taking a trip to the local mountains to have a quiet time together, with lunch afterward. I refused to go and was later rebuked by the male leader. With a little more thoughtfulness and consideration for people's feelings and plans, it could have been a fun, bonding time. Instead, it was an example of pride and presumption. I once disciplined a woman who tried to tell me that I wasn't a very good friend to her, that our relationship was business-like. I didn't listen and turned the tables on her instead, blaming it on her attitude. She was in the right but, nonetheless, agreed with me. I was in the wrong, pridefully using the ICOC discipling structure to justify my lack of love. It's one of my biggest regrets from my time in the group.

We also looked down on the "weak" members. I disciplined a woman who struggled with anxiety, something I should have sympathized with. She was in the middle of studying the Bible with someone and had to leave due to her anxiety. Instead of having compassion, I was frustrated with her for "giving in" to the anxiety. I once had a discipler with epilepsy. She related to me the difficulties she had in explaining to other disciples how her health limited her ability to do certain things. She had to learn to stand up for herself.

Our greatest arrogance as a movement was displayed toward people outside of our group. We assumed that people were lost simply because they weren't disciples in the ICOC. We referred to other Christians as "religious people." Shortly after my dad died, a sister approached me at midweek and asked me how I felt about my dad's death, knowing that he was lost. She had never met my father and I had never discussed his beliefs with her.

How does that kind of thinking play out in our relationship with God? Does it look something like this? "Lord, I'm a true disciple. I know I fall short and I'm thankful for your forgiveness when I mess up. But I'm really living sacrificially, being disciplined, discipling difficult people. I'm studying the Bible with people, sharing my faith. I'm not just religious like so many people." For someone on the church payroll, it may continue like this, "I work hard, and I gave up a lot to go into the ministry, so I deserve to be blessed financially and to be respected and obeyed by the church." Does that seem like an exaggeration? Well, Jesus told a parable that contained a fair amount of exaggeration, in order to make a point. It's in Luke 18:9-14.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast, and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

There’s no room for grace in the proud heart. I remember an incident in which two young women were having trouble getting along. They were roommates. We’ll call them Joanne and Mary. Joanne was a model ICOC disciple, committed, personable, well-liked. Mary was introverted, difficult to get to know, and didn’t get with the ICOC “program” as well as Joanne. Joanne talked to other sisters about the problems she had with Mary and people began to take her side. Mary didn’t try all that much to get people to change their minds. She knew that people were inclined to believe Joanne’s version of events without giving her a chance. I initially fell into that trap before talking to Mary. I then realized that there truly were two sides to every story. We were way too quick to take sides with someone who fit into the ICOC mold, and to believe the worst of the one who didn’t.

I regret my arrogant, judgmental attitudes as an ICOC member, and I’m grateful for God’s mercy and forgiveness. I find that the longer I’m away from the ICOC and the more I grow to understand God’s grace, the more humble and less judgmental I become. You need to have proper beliefs if you’re to have godly practices.

Build anything with arrogance, be it a nation or a church, and you will have God working against you. For those who walk in pride, he is able to humble. Nebuchadnezzar learned that lesson. I’m not convinced that the ICOC leadership has learned their lesson yet.

## **The Righteous Judge**

At this point, you may be getting uncomfortable. You’ve been taught to obey and trust your leaders, and some of the things I’m pointing out may seem disrespectful and critical. Hebrews 13:17 was preached many times from the pulpit when I was in the ICOC.

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

None of us wants to be distrustful of our spiritual leaders, or to treat them with disrespect. They have a difficult job and are often underappreciated. Just as we have received grace from our Lord, we need to extend grace to our leaders. But I need to say a few words about authority and obedience. Hebrews 13:17 has been misused by abusive, authoritarian leaders, including some leaders in the ICOC. The Greek word for “obey” in this passage is defined in the following manner:

“to persuade, to win over” or “to be persuaded, to listen to, to obey.” It goes on to say, “The ‘obedience’ suggested is not by submission to authority, but resulting from persuasion.”<sup>14</sup>

Why is this important? Jesus made it clear to his apostles that they were to be servant leaders and not to lord it over the flock. When they started to show a competitive spirit with one another, he nips it in the bud:

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Matthew 20:25-28

Peter learned the lesson his Lord taught him and modeled for him. Later in his life, he gave advice to his fellow elders, in 1 Peter 5:1-4

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed. Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Leaders are to lead the flock with tenderness, with persuasion and a good example, not harshly driving them with a stick. They are to lead the people under their care to knowledge of, and dependence on, Christ. Authoritarian leaders want people to depend on them. They go beyond legitimate Biblical authority, expecting the flock to obey them on personal and peripheral issues. Have you ever heard the phrase, “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely?” How many examples have we seen of that in our world? Have you ever seen a benevolent dictator?

Let’s look at a story from the Old Testament that illustrates the danger of authoritarian leadership. Rehoboam was Solomon’s son. Solomon reigned over Israel for forty years, and Rehoboam succeeded him after his death. The whole assembly of Israel went to Rehoboam at Shechem to make him king. They made the following request:

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<sup>14</sup> Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words



“Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you.”

1 Kings 12:4

Apparently, the people had felt oppressed under Solomon’s leadership. There’s no indication in the Bible that the harsh labor Solomon subjected the people to was ordered by God; on the contrary, when Israel first asked for a king to lead them, God gave them the following warning through Samuel:

He said, “This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the Lord will not answer you in that day.”

1 Samuel 8:10-18

The people were not persuaded by the Lord’s warning; they still wanted a king so that they could be like the nations around them, despite the heavy price they would have to pay for it. The problem is that they had rejected God as their king. They were so determined to imitate the nations around them that they were willing to suffer oppression and give up a great deal of their freedom in order to attain it.

Rehoboam told the people to give him three days to decide, so he could seek advice. So far, so good. Proverbs tells us that with many advisors, victory is assured. The elders who had served Solomon gave him this advice:

“If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants.”

1 Kings 12:7

Isn’t this what Jesus told his apostles, to be a servant leader? Had he exercised some humility and yielded to the peoples’ request, Rehoboam would have had their loyalty. I think this is an example of what Hebrews 13:17 is about. Don’t compromise on the truths of God’s Word, but be a flexible, humble servant. Be willing to bend on extra biblical issues, and you will be a persuasive leader.

But Rehoboam didn’t listen to the advice of the elders. The ICOC used to talk about “advice shopping.” It appears that this is what Rehoboam did. We’re told in 1 Kings 12:8

that Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him. It looks like he rejected the elders' advice before he even heard what the young men had to say. Apparently, the elders didn't tell him what he wanted to hear.

The young men who had grown up with him replied, "Tell these people who have said to you, 'Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our load lighter.' – tell them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's waist. My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.'"

1 Kings 12:10-11

Authoritarian leaders are focused on themselves, not on the people they lead. They lead harshly and control people to build up a fragile ego. Look at the difference between the advice Rehoboam received from the elders and the advice he received from the young men. The elders were concerned with the people. The young men were concerned with Rehoboam's authority. Their advice was for him to basically puff out his chest and show them who's boss. The problem was that God was supposed to be the boss. A godly leader is in submission to God.

So Rehoboam accepted the young men's advice and the results were disastrous. Israel became a divided kingdom, with only the tribe of Judah still remaining loyal to Rehoboam. Authoritarian, abusive leadership leads to destruction, division, and ruin.

I've seen examples of this type of leadership and the oppression it causes. When I was in the San Diego Church of Christ, our lead evangelist called a mandatory meeting of the church. He didn't announce what the meeting was for, but said that every member had to attend or their names would be removed from the church's membership roll. For those who had to work, he gave the following direction: anyone who made less than \$8.00 an hour needed to quit their jobs if they couldn't get the night off.

What was the meeting about? It was to rebuke the church for not bringing enough visitors to church and not having enough baptisms. My husband and I cancelled a trip to Las Vegas in order to be there. One couple returned early from their honeymoon in order to be there! I believe they had to cancel a cruise that they were planning to go on. I don't know if anyone quit their job in order to be at the meeting, but one can only imagine the financial difficulties that may have arisen for anyone who did so.

Was the evangelist acting within the parameters of legitimate Biblical authority when he made these pronouncements? Had he called a meeting and encouraged people to make it if at all possible, I don't think there would have been a problem. I'm not saying that the meeting itself was conducted in a godly manner; I'm merely looking at the command for everyone to attend. This spiritual leader overstepped his authority. I cannot imagine Jesus doing anything remotely like this. What kind of long-term effects did the congregation feel as a result of that abuse? I don't have the answer, but I'm sure that's an incident that many people will never forget, and it's not a positive memory.

Was that mandatory meeting about glorifying God or propping up the evangelist's ego and sense of worth as a leader? That's a question that only he can answer.

Why should church leaders give thought to the way they lead or have led others, in the church? Church leaders need to consider the way they've led and the example they've set for Christ's body. We all need to think soberly about our lives, but religious leaders all the more, because, according to God's Word, those who teach others will be judged more strictly (James 3:1)

This is not an easy topic to write about, but God has much to say in judgment of abusive, oppressive leaders. For anyone reading this who has led God's people in an abusive manner, take heed to the warning God is giving you and repent.

The oppressor will come to an  
end,  
and destruction will cease;  
the aggressor will vanish from  
the land.

In love a throne will be  
established;  
in faithfulness a man will sit  
on it –  
one from the house of  
David –  
one who in judging seeks  
justice  
and speeds the cause of  
righteousness.

Isaiah 16:4-5

## **Justice and Mercy: Marks of godly leadership**

How can we determine if a church leader is leading the church in a godly manner? There are two important factors to consider: doctrine and life (1 Timothy 4:16). The two go hand in hand. Correct doctrine will set you on the right path. False doctrine will lead to ungodly practices every time. Although I'm a serious student of the Bible, I'm far from being a theologian, so I'll focus primarily on the life rather than the doctrine. But I strongly encourage you to do some personal studies on Christian doctrine as a protection against false teaching.

Let's look at some scriptures on the qualities of godly leadership, specifically, justice and mercy. God is full of justice and mercy, and anyone who leads others in his name needs to imitate those qualities. Let's look at some compelling verses in Jeremiah 22. Jeremiah is prophesying against evil kings. Let's read verses 1-5.

This is what the Lord says: Go down to the palace of the king of Judah and proclaim this message there: ‘Hear the word of the Lord, O king of Judah, you who sit on David’s throne – you, your officials and your people who come through these gates. This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people. But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin.’”

So the Lord has given the king and his officials a choice: Do what is right and just and he’ll give them success. Don’t do what is right and just and he will bring them to ruin.

Jeremiah then goes on to prophecy against Shallum, who succeeded Josiah as king of Judah, and was taken into exile.

“He will die in the place where they have led him captive; he will not see this land again.”

“Woe to him who builds his  
palace by unrighteousness,  
his upper rooms by injustice,  
making his countrymen work  
for nothing,  
not paying them for their  
labor.

He says, ‘I will build myself a  
great palace  
with spacious upper rooms.’  
So he makes large windows in  
it,  
panels it with cedar  
and decorates it in red.

Jeremiah 27:12-14

Jeremiah then paints a contrast between Shallum and his father Josiah, and hints at his motive for behaving the way he did.

“Does it make you a king  
to have more and more cedar?  
Did not your father have food  
and drink?  
He did what was right and

just,  
so all went well with him.  
He defended the cause of the  
poor and needy,  
and so all went well.  
Is that not what it means to  
know me?"  
declares the Lord.

"But your eyes and your heart  
are set only on dishonest  
gain,  
on shedding innocent blood  
and on oppression and  
extortion."

Jeremiah 22:15-17

Josiah cared about building God's house. Shallum cared about building his own house. Josiah cared about internal matters of the heart. Shallum cared about the external. Josiah feared God. Shallum wanted to be like the kings of other nations. Josiah got his identity from God. Shallum got his identity from his position and title. A leader who is insecure and needs to be propped up will use and abuse people to meet his goals. A leader who loves God and wants to serve him will be just and merciful toward the people God has put in his care. He'll be careful to not show favoritism or place a heavy burden on the people. He'll have a soft heart for the poor and needy.

Jesus addressed these very issues in Mark 12:38-40

As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."

The Pharisees had no fear of God. They were trying to impress men with their outward religiosity. They thought nothing of exploiting widows, because widows didn't have money or power. They had nothing that the Pharisees could use in their efforts to build their own kingdom.

Several years ago, an ICOC leader gave a sermon in which he criticized the church for being full of "the weak and the weird." How do you think Jesus feels about the "weak and weird" people in your congregation? Jesus had a deep compassion for people, and a genuine concern for their needs. They weren't a notch on his belt or money in his pocket. In Matthew 11:28-29 Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and

humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

But you don’t understand Jesus. These people have sin in their lives. They’re in the situation they’re in because of their own bad choices. You need to be hardline with them. They’ll take advantage of your kindness, and they won’t do anything to advance the kingdom. They need direction Jesus.

If this is how you think, the Pharisees would agree with you. Here’s what Jesus has to say about it:

They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

Everything they do is done for men to see. They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them “Rabbi.”

But you are not to be called “Rabbi,” for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth “father” for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called “teacher,” for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.

Matthew 23:4-15

Let’s stop here for a moment. These were the cranking religious leaders of the day. They were devoted to the law, to its smallest detail. They tithed off of even their spices (v. 23). They prayed. They fasted. They were fired up for God. But Jesus was pretty fired up as well. Fired up with righteous indignation toward these pious pretenders. Not only because of their hypocrisy, but because of the damage they were doing to the people under their care. They shut the kingdom of heaven in the faces of those who were trying to enter. I guess they didn’t pass their cost-counting session and weren’t willing or able to abide by the endless rules that their teachers had added to God’s law.

The people were burdened and heavy laden with a religion of rules. But the Pharisees weren't burdened. They were happy because they had set up an external system of righteousness in which they got to choose who could enter and who couldn't. And by enacting an ever-growing list of regulations and traditions, they were assured that most people couldn't make it, and they could remain smugly confident in their feelings of religious superiority.

Until Jesus came along. Jesus threatened to ruin their party by throwing open the gates of God's kingdom to everybody, to anyone who would accept the invitation. Even the blind, the lame, the poor, even prostitutes and tax collectors. Not only did he welcome all, he turned upside down the world's notion of greatness. The greatest among you will be your servant. There's no room for pride in the spiritual kingdom that Jesus introduced, regardless of title, wealth, education, or any other privilege that the world honors. This infuriated the Pharisees, who had built up their own religious empire, with decidedly different values than the ones Jesus preached.

Pharisees are the same today as they were then – loving the place of honor, exploiting the people they're supposed to be serving for the sake of dishonest gain. And they disciple others to be just like them.

This is one of the dangers of playing “follow the leader.” You think you're being righteous by being obedient to your leaders and imitating their way of life. It's not always easy to detect a Pharisee. I would guess that most of the people in Jesus' day thought the Pharisees were righteous men. They put on a good show and had knowledge of the law that the people lacked. It's easy to look at a religious leader and be intimidated. But Jesus knew what was in their hearts. Jesus knew what really mattered in the sight of God, that the Pharisees didn't value the things that God valued.

Jesus warns us about teachers who come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are really ferocious wolves. Wolves do one thing: they devour.

There are similar warnings from Paul in Galatians, John in 1 and 2 John, Peter in 2 Peter, and Jude in the book that bears his name.

How can we know if our spiritual leaders are the real deal? We don't want to be judgmental, but we do need to be discerning, to make sure we haven't fallen for a lie.

Here's a list of things to look out for:

- False teachers are divisive.

Those who mislead God's people do so by taking the truth of scripture and twisting it just enough to still appear biblical, but different enough to set themselves apart from other teachers with their “new insights.” The subtle differences in their teaching bring about division in the church.

Jude 17-19 tells us:

But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, “In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires. These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.

In Acts 19:29-31 Paul tells the Ephesian elders:

“I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

What Paul said was true. History has born it out. In the 4th century, a man named Arius created a stir by teaching that Jesus was a created being, the first of God’s creation, the most perfect creation ever, but not God. The controversy he created was one of the driving forces behind the first Council of Nicea, convened by Constantine. The Council declared that the Father and the Son are of the same substance and are co-eternal, basing the declaration in the claim that this was a formulation of traditional Christian belief handed down from the Apostles. This led to the formulation of the Nicene Creed:

I believe in one God,  
The Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth,  
And of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the only begotten Son of God,  
begotten of his Father before all worlds,  
God of God, Light of Light,  
very God of very God,  
begotten, not made,  
being of one substance with the Father;  
by whom all things were made;  
who for us men and for our salvation  
came down from heaven,  
and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost  
of the Virgin Mary,  
and was made man;  
and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered and was buried;  
and the third day he rose again  
according to the Scriptures,



and ascended into heaven,  
and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;

And, he shall come again, with glory,  
to judge both the quick and the dead;  
whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord, and Giver of Life,  
who proceedeth from the Father [and the Son];  
who with the Father and the Son together  
is worshipped and glorified;  
who spake by the Prophets.  
And I believe one holy and Catholic and Apostolic church;  
I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;  
and I look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. AMEN<sup>15</sup>

Note that the word Catholic in the Nicene creed means “universal,” and is not a reference to what came to be known as the Catholic Church. This creed was used to determine who was Orthodox and who was not.

There isn't universal agreement among all Protestant and Orthodox denominations about every detail in this particular creed, but it's helpful to learn a little bit of Christian history. When a minister or church seems to be teaching something new, something different from other Christian churches, it's probably a heresy that's been around for centuries. For instance, the heresy propagated by Arius, which came to be known as Arianism, is still around and is promoted by cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Children of God.

- **Religious leaders mislead by taking away freedom in Christ.**

Paul dealt with a group known as the Judaizers, who insisted that the Gentiles who came to faith in Christ needed to be circumcised and follow other parts of the law. Paul dealt with this firmly in Galatians. He tells them to give no ground to these men.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

Galatians 5:1-4

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<sup>15</sup> Wikipedia

We are saved by grace, not by works, so that no man may boast (Eph. 3:8). Grace and law go together like fire and water.

The Judaizers were legalists, like the Pharisees. Legalists have always existed and probably always will. They're grace stealers and freedom stealers, and we have to keep watch and not give such people an inch.

- **False teachers are secretive**

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them – bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.

2 Peter 2:1-2

There's something refreshing about a person who speaks plainly. Beware of the preacher or church that has different levels of knowledge for different people. A church that withholds certain doctrines from people until they're "spiritual enough" to understand has got something to hide.

- **They exploit the people they're supposed to serve.**

In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.

2 Peter 2:3

You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face.

2 Cor. 11-19-20

Authoritarian leadership is an example of exploitation. I once had an evangelist who angrily told his audience that if they didn't like what he was saying, there was the door! He also once chastised my sector for sitting down after coming home from work and "taking little five minute vacations."

- **They seduce the unstable.**

With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed – an accursed brood!

2 Peter 2:14

They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are

## ***Ungodly Leadership: Tolerating the Intolerable***

swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth – men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected.

2 Timothy 2:6-8

For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity – for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.

2 Peter 2:18-19

When I was going through the ICOC study series, I was encouraged to “be a Berean.” In Acts 17:11 we read the following:

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examine the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

Let us never be so taken with any preacher or church that we fail to examine what they teach and compare it with the teachings of the Bible. Since it’s easy to distort the scriptures or take them out of context to promote a pet doctrine, it’s helpful, once you’ve studied the scriptures for yourself, to compare the teachings you’ve been given with the teachings of other churches and denominations. If you find that your church is teaching anything radically different from other churches, be careful. Let’s look at church history and gain some knowledge. We don’t have to go to Bible school or become theologians to become religiously educated. There’s plenty of solid material available for us to read. That challenge is for myself and for everyone who reads this. Let’s heed the advice found in Proverbs 14:15, “A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps.”

Since there are religious leaders who distort the truth, knowingly or not, it’s vital that we be intimately familiar with the truth so we can determine when we’re being misled.

### ***The Justice and Mercy of Christ***

Isaiah 42 prophecies about Jesus and illustrates both his justice and mercy. Let’s take a look at some scriptures from this chapter:

“Here is my servant, whom  
I uphold,  
my chosen one I whom I  
delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him  
and he will bring justice to

the nations.  
He will not shout or cry out,  
or raise his voice in the  
streets.  
A bruised reed he will not  
break,  
and a smoldering wick he will  
not snuff out.  
In faithfulness he will bring  
forth justice;  
he will not falter or be  
discouraged  
till he establishes justice on  
earth.  
In his law the islands will  
put their hope.”

“I, the Lord, have called you in  
righteousness;  
I will take hold of your hand.  
I will keep you and will make  
you  
to be a covenant for the  
people  
and a light for the Gentiles,  
to open eyes that are blind,  
to free captives from prison  
and to release from the  
dungeon those who sit in  
darkness.

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

Isaiah 42:6 is similar to Isaiah 61:1-2, which Jesus quotes in Luke 4:18-19:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on  
me,  
because he has anointed me  
to preach good news to the  
poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim  
freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the  
blind,  
to release the oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the  
Lord’s favor.

The Lord sees the needy in their sorrow and suffering. He sees those who are bowed down by legalism and religious perfectionism. Jesus is humble and gentle in heart (Matthew 11:29). He didn't come shouting on the street corners. He touched lepers and held children in his arms. He didn't need to scream and shout. People saw his power through the miracles he performed, heard wise words and teachings that turned their spiritual understanding upside down, and they saw his love. His love didn't discriminate. It was, and is, available to all. He didn't give them a list of religious requirements to follow; the Pharisees and teachers of the law made sure the people knew what they should be doing, including not only the Law of Moses, but their own traditions as well.

Jesus came with a heart full of compassion. He didn't despise the bruised reeds. He didn't despise their weakness and tell them they needed to try harder or they would be booted out of his kingdom. He didn't pour water on the smoldering wicks, adding regulation upon regulation to those who were barely making it. He didn't even chastise them for being smoldering wicks, pointing out all the sins that contributed to their condition. They had the Pharisees for that.

So what do we make of Jesus, the holy Son of God, stooping down to love and serve the lowliest of people? Does this compassionate and humble picture of Jesus trouble you? I remember the way the ICOC talked about Jesus. They occasionally focused on Jesus' compassion, but they more frequently talked about Jesus being bold and hardline. He laid out the cost for following him and didn't compromise. I think this picture of Christ short changes his righteous character. How does the ICOC hardline Jesus deal with a bruised reed? In a church built on discipleship, total commitment, and hard work, the bruised reed is a problem, a hindrance to the goals of the group. Their weakness may be tolerated for a while, with one eye on the stop watch, foot tapping impatiently. How long will they remain bruised? They're making excuses and not being disciples! There's a problem when men have an agenda for the church, and insist that every member march lockstep in conformity to their plan. The ICOC believed that everybody in the church needed to be a disciple, according to their criteria. They didn't want to be like other churches, and with that competitive mentality, it was inevitable that members who, for whatever reason, were weaker and more fragile than others in the church, would not be treated with the compassion of Christ. Jesus cares for each of us as individuals and does not want to lose any of his sheep. In Luke 15:1-7, Jesus tells a parable to this effect.

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Then Jesus told them this parable. "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing

in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Imagine what the lost sheep may have gotten itself into. It may have been attacked by a wild animal and was left torn and bleeding. It may have wandered into an area where there was no water or grazing land, and was left hungry and thirsty. In the same way, when a lost sinner turns to Jesus, he may be broken, bruised, and hungry. Jesus doesn't tell him to clean himself up and regain his strength before coming to him. Jesus himself binds up our wounds and feeds us (John 7:37-38; John 6:53-58; Isaiah 30:19-26). People come into God's kingdom beaten and bruised, harassed and helpless. Is God's church a hospital or an army? I don't think it's either one, but hurting people, even redeemed hurting people, often need some compassionate care to come to a place of wholeness. Some would likely complain, "The kingdom of God is forcefully advancing. We can't put our mission on hold to baby sit these needy people." They may not use those exact words, but the attitude has certainly been displayed. The bruised reed and the smoldering wick need hope, not a check off list.

The mercy of Christ is obvious and compelling, but what of his justice? Some of us are more comfortable with the concept of justice than we are that of mercy. So what of it? How is Jesus just? Take a look at Isaiah 42:10-17. There's a note of victory that runs through these verses, of the Lord as a mighty warrior (v. 13) marching triumphantly against his foes.

God is the one true God. He has no rival. Jesus' death on the cross was a victory over the powers and authorities in the heavenly realms. We see that in Colossians 2:13-15:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Our sin against a holy God demanded justice. Jesus satisfied that need by sacrificing himself. We deserved condemnation, and instead we received mercy. Isaiah 42 stated that he would not falter or be discouraged until he established justice on the earth. He established that justice through the shedding of his own blood. What a savior!

## **Who Will You Serve?**

As I mentioned in an earlier section, God used Assyria as a tool to discipline his people. Once that discipline was complete, he set Israel free and punished their oppressors.

If a nation can be a tool in God's hand, can a church? I believe that God used the ICOC as a tool in my life to humble my heart and teach me to put my trust in him alone. I think it's likely that he's used the ICOC as a tool in other peoples' lives as well, possibly even your own. That doesn't mean the ICOC has his blessing. In the sermon I listened to the other night, the ICOC evangelist talked about what a tough decade the church had gone through, but said that the church is growing. As has been typical of the ICOC over the years, he used numbers as a measurement of growth. The ICOC has always been impressed with the external. They've used their baptism numbers in the past to convince themselves and others that they were doing God's will and that he was blessing them. But how many of the people they've baptized over the years are still in the ICOC? Of the many who have left, how many lost their faith in God in the process? How many were left spiritually and emotionally damaged? How many of those still in could be classified as the walking wounded? I'm amazed at the arrogance that still exists in the ICOC leadership to trumpet numbers as a reason to boast and to refer to themselves, as this man did, as "God's church."

Have they learned nothing in the last eight years? The real signs of repentance and spiritual growth are not so easy to measure, and the ICOC has always looked for something to point to, something to allow them to pat themselves on the back. The sermon was about climbing mountains and working hard at any age, having big dreams, etc. It was pretty similar to many "inspirational" ICOC sermons that I've heard over the years. At its heart, the sermon was about the ICOC recapturing its "glory," though the evangelist didn't state it as such. The other two ICOC sermons I've listened to recently also had a recapture the glory feel to them.

Do these leaders realize they're glorifying their movement instead of God? It hurts to hear God's name mentioned in sermons in which he clearly is not the focus of attention or the one receiving glory. It's insulting to his majesty and power.

This section of the paper has been the most difficult to write. My heart is to write about God's grace and the blessings that come from seeking him first. But a funny thing happened along the way. Each morning, during my quiet time, I ask the Lord to help me know what to write that day. I tell him I want to write what he would have me to write. A number of scripture references come to mind – not the scriptures themselves, but the book and chapter – and I look them up. I look at all he's shown me that day and ask for discernment. The scriptures usually go together very well, much like a puzzle and it gives me direction on what to write about. But God has disappointed me by giving me a number of scriptures about ungodly leadership, pride, and judgment. These were not the things I wanted to write about, but he persists on putting these topics in front of my face again and again. So I write about ungodly leadership; about pride; about God's judgment.

But in the midst of the rebuke and judgment of God is a beautiful redemption for his people – for all those who love him and are willing to bow the knee to him.

One of my readings this morning was in 1 Kings 18. It's a familiar story about Elijah challenging the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. It's the kind of big, dramatic story that the ICOC has always loved. But they probably won't love it so much when they're asked to apply it to themselves.

We can summarize the story as follows: Elijah calls a meeting with the 450 prophets of Baal to be held before the nation of Israel. It's a showdown to determine whose God is really the Lord. Before the contest begins, Elijah challenges the people:

“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”

1 Kings 18:21

The response he received was silence. He's calling the people to stop “following the leader,” to stop putting their trust in men, and have their own faith in the God of heaven. They were faithless and fickle and their hearts were drawn to idolatry. Somehow, God wasn't enough for them, and Elijah's calling them to make a decision. But they refuse – until God sends down fire from heaven; then they believe. Israel had done this throughout their history. They trusted in God when he worked a miracle, but their hearts quickly strayed. Elijah's calling them to put away the idols and trust God **before** the miracle takes place.

Why was God not enough? Why was he not enough in my life for so many years? I lacked the faith and humility to trust him and walk with him without props. The prop of discipling; the prop of daily evangelism; the prop of being part of “God's church,” of being a part of something awesome. It's not that discipleship is necessarily bad, and evangelism is obviously a good thing. Church is a good thing. But those things, those measurements of my Christianity, were God to me. I needed to be able to see him with my eyes. I needed to see my faith fleshed out with deeds and activities. I didn't have spiritual eyes to see Jesus. I was walking by sight, not by faith. I needed to be propped up with big, bold church services, with a lot of church activities and social events. I had my daily quiet times, but my relationship with God seemed more theoretical than real and personal. When I look through my old church notes, it's surprising to see how many orthodox statements I wrote down from the sermons; things like, “We're not under the law, but under grace,” and “There's no condemnation in Christ.” It's funny how hollow those statements really were, as they were contradicted in virtually every sermon and lesson we received. In the ICOC, grace, like worship, was something we talked about occasionally, but didn't really believe in; we didn't really believe there was power in God's grace; we didn't really believe in worshiping God just because he deserves it, just because we wanted to. We didn't really believe that the Holy Spirit was in the process of changing us from the inside out. We believed that Christians were still controlled by the old nature, that we were still consistently inclined to want to sin and to be deceitful about it. We denied the incredible power of Christ's resurrection at work in our lives as



individuals. God can do amazing things corporately in his Church, but he also is at work transforming his children individually, without the hand-holding of a discipleship partner.

Give glory to God! Who will you serve? The God of the ICOC is small and subservient to their interests. The God of the ICOC doesn't have the power to transform anyone all on his own, without their assistance. The ICOC is not doing God any favors with self-glorification and boasting of men. It may not be as flagrant as it was in the "glory days," but I see no change in the spirit of the church's leadership. If the ICOC were to really experience a surge in numerical growth, how much humility do you think would be displayed by leadership? I saw an ICOC website advertising a book about spiritual mid-life crises, and on the outside of the book four or five bullet points were listed. The first one was "Surviving Your Success." Something about that gnawed at me. I'm not going to critique a book I haven't read, but that point just stuck with me and rubbed me the wrong way. I suspect the author is making a reference to either complacency or pride; when a person has experienced success in life, it can result in either of those two things. So it's relevant enough. I think it's the use of the word "success" that bothered me. In my days in the ICOC, you were either a success or a failure; black or white, no room for gray. It could change from week to week, depending on "how you did" that week, but we heard sermon after sermon about being successful as disciples. The points typically had to do with sin, evangelism and discipleship – the big three. Success or failure hinged on our performance in these areas. Are you sharing your faith? Are you confessing your sin? Are you getting with your discipleship partner? Our Christian lives had been distilled into a three-point sermon which was repeated over and over and over again. The problem is, I don't see "successful" ever used in the New Testament as an adjective to describe a follower of Jesus. The more Biblical term is "faithful." Are we being faithful to our Lord? Our faithfulness, or lack of it, can't be neatly packaged into a three-point sermon. One person's faithfulness may not look exactly the same as another person's faithfulness. The Lord knows each of us personally, and, while the Bible tells us that certain things are wrong, and gives us guidelines on how to live faithful lives, the Holy Spirit leads each of us on our own course. This doesn't take away unity from the church, because, according to Scripture, we're the body of Christ. We're not all the same part and we don't all have the same function, so how could faithfulness be identical for each of us? Faithfulness to the Lord, as each part does its work, builds up the unity of the body. Words like "success" and "failure" breed competition and wordliness. If you're deemed a failure by the church's standards, you feel discouraged. If you're deemed a success, you become proud. So when I saw that book, it made me think that attitudes in ICOC leadership had likely changed little.

I hope I'm wrong. I hope we've all learned to take the focus off of ourselves and our works and to put that focus on Jesus. The only work worth boasting about is the work Jesus did on the cross for each of us. Who are you serving? Regardless of church affiliation, it is Christ that we serve. Our service to other people is rooted in reverence for, and submission to, Christ. We love those that he loves and we serve them as he's served us. But we must be clear on who we're really serving and who gets the glory.

## **No Substitutes**

All of us have become like one  
    who is unclean,  
    and all our righteous acts are  
    like filthy rags;  
we all shrivel up like a leaf,  
    and like the wind our sins  
    sweep us away.  
No one calls on your name  
    or strives to lay hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face  
    from us  
    and made us waste away  
    because of our sins.

Yet, O Lord, you are our  
    Father.  
We are the clay, you are the  
    potter;  
we are all the work of your  
    hand.

Isaiah 64:6-8

The Lord is the potter. We are the clay. He's the master artist who shapes us and molds us as he pleases.

A modeling material called Plasticine was formulated in 1897 by an Englishman named William Harbutt. He was an art teacher who wanted a non-drying clay for his sculpture students to use. Plasticine is composed of calcium salts, petroleum jelly and long-chain aliphatic acids. It's superficially similar to Play Doh and has largely been used for teaching art to children<sup>16</sup>

Plasticine is a substitute for clay. A man came up with the idea to create a product that had the properties of clay without the qualities that he found undesirable. There's nothing immoral in creating a synthetic substitute for a natural product. But there's something very immoral in creating a spiritual substitute. God intended for us to experience "the real thing," a powerful, intimate, life-changing relationship with him through the sacrifice of his Son. He intended for us to be raised from the dead to new life, to eternal life that only he can give. He intended for us to experience the transforming power of his indwelling

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<sup>16</sup> Wikipedia

Spirit. Jesus said that we are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14-16). That light was meant to shine brightly so that men and women would be drawn to it and seek out the source of that light, which is Christ.

A substitute is an imitation of an original object. It's often inferior in quality or of less value. An art collector would not pay \$1,000,000 for a replica of a Van Gogh, no matter how closely it mimicked the original. The ICOC has created a spiritual substitute, an imitation of Biblical Christianity. It is, in every way, inferior and of much less value than the real thing. They thought they had a better plan than the one formulated by God before the beginning of time. They thought they could improve on the real thing. Instead of leading people to put their trust wholly in Christ, and teaching them to submit to the molding of the Holy Spirit within, they taught people to put their trust in their discipling methods. They thought they could do a better job than the Holy Spirit at molding people into the image of Christ. All they've succeeded in doing is molding people into their own image, much as the Pharisees trained their disciples to be like them – and we know how that turned out. Why rely on the wisdom of men, when you could experience the power of God? Why accept a works-based salvation when you could experience the endless depths of God's grace and acceptance?

In the end, spiritual substitutes don't satisfy and they don't save. Our salvation comes from Jesus alone. How then can the ICOC say that a person won't make it to heaven without discipling? That's a substitute. We're saved by God's grace. There's nothing we can do to merit God's favor. How then can the ICOC require prospective converts to write sin lists and show their repentance by specific deeds prior to baptism? That's a substitute.

Have you accepted something other than the real thing? Have you fallen for a substitute? The ICOC dream has to die. Like the kernel of seed that falls to the ground and dies, producing many seeds, the death of the ICOC dream enables God to give us true life, peace and power to change on the inside. It's the real thing. Don't settle for anything less.