

## Always On My Mind

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I can still remember the first time I ever prayed with a friend outside of normal praying circumstances (church services, devotionals, dinner, etc.). There were some particularly hard times in my life that had pushed me away from God, taking my spiritual life to a “skin deep” level. After talking about them with a close friend of mine, she suggested that we pray together about them. I had tried nearly every technique I knew and consulted every self-help guru that I could find on the bookshelves at Hastings, and nothing worked, so why not give this a shot? It was only the two of us, and so, being the male, I awkwardly closed my eyes, bowed my head, and started speaking what was on my mind, in a very “I’m too cool for this” kind of attitude. The prayer itself was stilted, very jagged, pretty shallow, and it never even came close to expressing my true feelings. After it was over, she looked at me and said, “Did that help?” It had.

Up until that point, God had always been a taboo topic in any conversation I had with anyone, unless we were standing in the church building. None of my friends talked about God, why should I talk about Him? I had always been taught that serving God should never be a “showy” religion, where WWJD bracelets and prayer rugs are the norm. The things associated with that, courtesy of our denominational friends, are sayings like, “I just feel it in my heart that God is with me,” or “Has God talked to you yet?” Of course, in order to separate myself from something like that, God never came into conversation, He was never mentioned, and anything that resembled denominational religion was blocked off. But should it have been?

Deuteronomy 6:8 instructs those under the old Law, to bind the commandments of the Law as “a sign on your hands, and as frontals on your forehead.” Why did God command this of His people? Because He wanted them always to recognize, first and foremost, who their Master and Provider was. Keeping Him the focal point of their life was pivotal to maintaining that healthy relationship. We often wonder about the spiritual and holy attitude of those we read about in the New Testament, how they could have maintained that attitude in every situation. How did David know how to react in the cave with Saul where he could have killed him and taken the throne, but refused (1 Samuel 23-24)? How could Job’s righteous soul been vexed with the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah, even when he wasn’t partaking of it (2 Peter 2:7-8)? It was because their love for God and the will to do His will superseded every aspect of their life, permeated their very soul, and entered into their minds on a daily basis.

Paul would say in Romans 1:16 that he was not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ. Why? “Because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...” Do you think Paul was ever scared to bring up God in everyday life? Absolutely not. As a matter of fact, I would be willing to bet that most of his sentences dripped with evidence of his love for the Master. It probably never felt awkward to Him to discuss it with someone, as

if they were going to think he was a crazy religious nut for it. It was his life, and it was a part of who he was, and everyone around him knew it.

It'd be one thing to say my story is unique, but I have seen others with similar problems. We address an issue, and attack it from every side, except the one that truly matters: God's. We will speak about every thing under the sun, except for how God is in our life. We will spend hours talking about baseball and friends, but won't spend ten minutes engaged in prayer. It's not a time issue, we certainly can spare that, but rather a social issue. What will your fellow Christians think if you ask to sing "Alleluia"? What will your friends think if they see you praying? Try it sometime, you might be surprised at the results.

The hypocrites in Jesus' time were condemned for their "surface only" doctrine, displaying through multiple colors their desire for God, but remaining only a dull gray in the true practice of it (Matthew 23:25-28). What this shows us is there are two paths that we can take in public and private service and praising of Him: either we can use God conveniently when it serves our own purposes, as a means to an end, or we can let it permeate our lives and let it flow forth in a way that actually means something. In Matthew 15:18-20, Jesus tells us that our true desires comes forth from the heart. It works the same with a righteous heart. "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone among you cheerful? He is to sing praises" (James 5:13).

Think back to the times where you felt close to your brethren. Many of you will recall times where a few of you sat in the living room and discussed a Bible passage. Others will reflect on a morning sunrise with some friends, where one person started singing "How Great Thou Art," only to have the others join in. God knew that it wouldn't be the secular enjoyment of the day, such as movie nights, basketball, or ski trips, that would bring His people closer together, but rather simple meditation on His glory. These are the times you remember; this is what Heaven will be like.

Keeping our lives focused on God is the great benefit of constantly dwelling on His will. When He is what we think about, it's not awkward to sing with friends, talk about the Bible, or even pray with a brother or sister in Christ. Fellowship with our Christians is not canned food drives or bake sales, but joining together in glorifying His name. Are we doing this in our lives, or are we fearful to mention God in everyday life and conversation because of what others will think? Remember what Jesus said, "For where two or three have gathered in my name, I am there in their midst" (Matthew 18:20).

## Breaking Tradition

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Sadly, it seems that many of our brethren today have gone beyond what the word of God binds and are binding matters of opinion on one another. Equally as sad is the fact that in a "pendulum" style reaction to that extremity is the willingness of many of our brethren to unbind what God has bound in His word. The young Christian today is forced with the challenge of maneuvering between the two extremities in order to see

the Lord's will done in His church. While many articles are published by conservative brethren today targeting issues where certain things that God has not authorized have been unbound (for instance: musical instruments in worship, scriptural use of the Lord's funds, etc.), very little work has been done concerning the error of so many in over-regulating the faith. Therefore, this series of articles is intended to consider a few of the ways Christ broke tradition and to help us reflect on whether or not we are allowing our culture and opinions to hinder the work of the Lord.

### *Breaking Tradition in Fasting*

While our Lord lived and walked in the flesh He encountered the epidemic of tradition-binding all around Him. Even among the disciples of John there were those that had yet to understand authority in its proper light. In Luke 5:33-39, we see some of John's disciples questioning Christ concerning the fasting habits of His followers. They asked, "Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink" (Lk 5:33)? Jesus' response built an argument that was intended to defend His disciples and simultaneously calm any tensions that may exist over this matter. His argument was fourfold: 1) They are with the bridegroom; therefore, mourning (as is often associated with fasting; Esther 4:3) is not appropriate at this time; 2) an old garment should not be repaired with new cloth (or vice versa); 3) new wine needs a new wineskin and vice versa; and, 4) those drinking old wine do not immediately desire the new, but the implication is that they will eventually. While some of Christ's responses may seem cryptic to us, the point He was making should help to interpret them. It seems that the new cloth and new wine He speaks of is the new religious mindset the disciples of Christ were following. Christ did not rebuke those of the old religious mindset (He actually understood it; v. 39), but He would not allow those in the new mindset to be rebuked either. There needed to be acceptance between the two. Christ's disciples, after all, were not breaking the Law of Moses but the religious traditions of men. Never did God command the frequency of fasting that the Pharisees and disciples of John taught.

While combating the religious world's lack of authority in their actions we must remember not to make the same mistakes on the opposite end of the spectrum. Where did the Pharisees and others receive the authority to require the amount of fasting that they did? Was it from God or man? They viewed Christ's teaching as "new," and therefore bad. Especially as young people we must understand that anything different or new makes many immediately uncomfortable or angry. Let us always remember that both old and new mindsets have an important place in the body of Christ. After all, the old eventually runs out and the cycle begins again.

## Our Plans Versus God's Works

Gary Head

As young people, we are told our entire lives to make plans. In elementary school, we are told to plan on having recess. As students in middle school, we are told to plan out time to do homework. And as students in high school and college, we are told to map out the

rest of our lives. But as we are growing up, we put too much stock and faith into our own man-made plans. We plan to do this career, make this amount of money, get married to exactly this type of person, have this many kids, and retire at this age. But where does God fall in all these plans?

Obviously, a lot of our plans will fail due to the circumstances of life. When this occurs, we find ourselves asking why? not only to ourselves, but to God. We empty so much of ourselves into our views of the future that we forget the most essential purpose, foundation, and rock for our life -- our Father in Heaven. One finds through careful searching of the scriptures and experience, that Gods works are much greater than our plans.

In Genesis 37-46, we find the full account of the life of Joseph. As a boy, God blessed him with the special gift of interpreting dreams, as well as favor in the sight of his father, Jacob. However, with the spiritual gift and the delight of his father, came the loathing of his brothers. As jealousy filled their hearts, their anger turned to wrath and they threw him into a pit, thereafter selling him into slavery and convincing Jacob that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.

Take just a moment here and reflect upon what has happened thus far; how many of us have had the hatred and loathing of every one of our brothers and sisters? How many of us have been sold into slavery and carried into a faraway land? Now ask yourself, did Joseph want his life to come out this way? Is this what he planned for himself?

We see that Josephs journey through desperation and catastrophic changes doesnt stop there. From being made a slave of Potiphars house and running from temptation to being thrown into prison; from helping fellow inmates in prison be brought back into the court of Pharaoh to being forgotten by those he helped -- Joseph faced unexpected disaster at every turn of his life. For the average person today, this would merit severe depression, multiple suicide attempts, and many visits to psychiatrists. However, such was not the case with Joseph.

Through every twist and turn in his life, Joseph put his God first. Even though nothing he could have possibly planned went according to the way he had dreamed it, he still resisted temptation and persevered. Though horrible experiences and daunting tests shrouded the first 30 years of Josephs life, God brought all these things together and blessed Joseph and his family by saving their lives and making Joseph above all in the powerful Egyptian kingdom, second only to Pharaoh.

We look at our lives and we see events that, at the moment, seem completely and utterly catastrophic -- a failed class, a bad break-up, a car accident. Yet, in the grand scheme of Gods plan, these things shouldnt bring us into hopelessness and despair, it should do the opposite. A famous financial counselor named Dave Ramsey says, If you want to know how to make God laugh, tell Him all of your plans. Gods foresight, as in every aspect of God, is eternally greater than mans. How can we possibly put so much faith in a course of life made by our eternally finite minds? The worth of our own man-made plans is nothing. Such misplaced faith is dangerous and will not be rewarded.

When everything we plan to happen in our lives goes out the window, our faith in God should not. We as Christians can trust that God will not give a stone to a child of His who asks for bread. Joseph lived his life for God, and knew it was his responsibility to

serve God in everything he did, no matter what situation he found himself in, or how little he had planned for it. We as young Christians also have this responsibility -- no matter how much change occurs in the life we thought we had planned out. We must serve God faithfully, fully trusting in Him to bring all things together for good.

## Spiritual Warfare

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The people of God are at war. We fight, not because we are warmongers, but because Satan is trying to kill us spiritually (1 Pet. 5:8). We experience battles every day in almost every situation we find ourselves in. Sometimes the temptations are relentless, and sometimes it seems like some of these fights were lost before they ever began. We may ask, "How long Lord? How long must we struggle through this life?" I suggest we lose some of these battles because we sometimes lose our focus before we ever get into the fight. It is our focus we must maintain if we are going to win these battles. Colossians 3:1-3 would have us to set our minds on things above, to focus on who we are and what we are doing on this earth. That is the whole point of praying without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:8). If we constantly pour our hearts out to our Holy Father every time we have the opportunity, we will be continually reminded of what our mission is on this battlefield.

Who are we trying to please? Is our focus on God and service, or is our focus fixed on acceptance and comfort? "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Tim. 3:12). If we want to be like our Lord, Jesus the Christ, we can expect the world to hate us (John 15:18ff). If we want to serve God, if we are going to speak as the oracles of God, we cannot be at peace with the sin of this world. As soldiers of Jesus Christ, we seek the approval of God (2 Tim. 2:3-4). If we are diligent in our conduct and study, we do not need to be ashamed of Christ. He gave us a warning in Luke 9:26, saying, "Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels." In this country, we cannot be stoned, whipped, beaten, or killed for standing up for Christ. No Coliseum towers over us, containing our deaths in the forms of lions or swords. We might lose a job and have old friends walk away from us, but the stakes are not life or death.

Christ said "If you continue in My word, then you are My disciples indeed; And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:31-32). We claim to be disciples of Jesus, but how well do we know His word? If we do not know His word, how can we continue to follow it and use it to fight "against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12)? Deuteronomy 6 demonstrates how important spiritual knowledge was to God's people. They were supposed to teach God's word all the time. They were supposed to have it written in what they thought and did with their hands. They were supposed to write it on the doorposts and gates. No matter where they were or what they were doing, God's word was with them. If we cannot combat the

evils we face every day, are we truly Jesus' disciples? Will we desert Christ because we love what this world has to offer (2 Tim. 4:10)? May it never be!

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." (Josh. 1:9). Can you trust that God will help you in your spiritual battles? Is your God strong enough that you will trust Him to fight for you? If He can kill a 9 ft. tall giant with 1 stone (1 Sam. 17), can he defeat the temptations you face? Do you believe you have a sure victory in Christ? Do you believe "... all things work for good to them that love the Lord"(Rom.8:28)? Do you believe He died for you so He could justify and glorify you? "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us" (Rom. 8: 31)? "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). Prepare for battle soldier.

## The Voice of Experience

### What Paul Said About The Church

**Kyle Campbell**

I have always found it interesting to see how someone's opinion is valued after they become famous. All you have to do is see how music and movie stars, once they reach stardom, are asked their opinion on such issues as raising children, global warming, and politics. But when you get right down to it, they are only human and their opinion means about as much as anyone else's. Paul made six interesting statements about the church, and he had an unusual relationship to heaven. Paul was inspired (1 Corinthians 2:9-13; Ephesians 3:3-5), and because the New Testament is a verbally inspired book, what Paul says about the church is really what the Holy Spirit says about the church. Therefore, it will "build us up in the most holy faith" to examine Paul's statements about the church.

#### **Paul Said The Church Is The Manifestation Of God's Manifold Wisdom**

In Ephesians 3:8-10, Paul said the church makes known the manifold wisdom of God. The term "manifold" means variegated, or many colored. Peter informs us that angels desire to look into God's plan (1 Peter 1:12). When they see the church, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, they see the all the many facets of God's wisdom. God's plan before the foundation of the world is now carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ephesians 1:4). The premillennial concept makes the church an afterthought or a substitute, but a correct understanding of Ephesians 3:8-10 helps us see the importance of the church. not man's wisdom

#### **Paul Said The Church Was Bought By The Blood Of Jesus**

When Paul made his statement in Acts 20:28, two points stand out. First, the church of Jesus Christ is valuable. Do you have a possession that you would die for? Jesus wanted the church to exist so badly that He was willing to die for it. You will meet people in your life who proclaim to love Jesus but they could care less about the church! Second, Acts 20:28 shows ownership. God paid for the church with His Son's blood (John 3:16). In Romans 16:16, Paul says that the "churches of Christ salute you," and this is a phrase of ownership (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:2); it is not a denominational name or designation. The car of Kyle Campbell is in my driveway because I paid for it. Furthermore, because the church was bought by Christ's blood, God gave Christ as its head (Ephesians 1:22). The term "head" implies authority and direction. He directs everything that pertains to His church (Matthew 17:5; 28:18).

### **Paul Said The Church And The Body Are The Same**

Ephesians 1:23 and Colossians 1:18 both teach that the church and the body are the same. It is ridiculous to hear people who say that they love the Lord but do not want to be a member of the church. They are inseparable! Everyone has material blessings, but only those who obey God have rich, spiritual blessings bestowed upon them. These spiritual blessings are found in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). When we think of the church as a body we should think of it as a living organism, composed of people who are priests of God (1 Peter 2:5). Your spiritual sacrifices are just as important as the next persons' (Hebrews 13:15).

### **Paul Said The Church Is One Body Composed Of Individuals**

In Ephesians 4:4-6, there are seven "ones" that culminate with God. If someone were preaching "Worship the God of your choice," he would be laughed at, but he is hailed as great and broad-minded when he embraces all churches. If there is one God, there can only be one church. When you bought your first car, if you went to a used car lot that only had one car and the salesman told you to pick whatever car was on the lot, you would think he is crazy. Jesus said regarding the church that there would be no choice (Matthew 16:18). Denominations today believe that the church is composed of the different denominations, but Paul said it was composed of individuals (1 Corinthians 12:20, 27).

### **Paul Said The Church Is The Household Of God**

In Ephesians 2:19, Paul uses a domestic figure to describe the church. Those who were once alienated from God are now in His family. The term "house" or "household" refers to the family (Acts 16:15, 31-34; Hebrews 11:7). In 1 Timothy 3:15, the household of God is called the church of God. Every Christian is a part of this family (Roman 8:16-17) and has a responsibility to obey God the Father (2 Corinthians 6:16-18; 1 Peter 1:14). This congregation ought to see itself not as individual families, but as one aggregate whole. As one whole we work together, weep together, rejoice together, and grow together. You must always remember that you are important in your congregation, not someone to be overlooked and unused!

### **Paul Said The Church Is A Saved Body**

The church is a saved body because Jesus Christ is Savior of the body (Ephesians

5:23), and God cannot save outside the body (Acts 2:41, 46-47). On the day of judgment, if you are not a member of that body, then you cannot be saved. That statement is not politically correct, but it is biblically correct. The New Testament writers affirmed that no one is saved and added to the church until they have been baptized (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27; 1 Peter 3:21). Your friends may try to convince you that all you need to do to accept Jesus as your Savior and then convince you that every church is the same, but when the Ethiopian eunuch was baptized, the Lord added him to the church of His choice, the church of Christ (Acts 8:32-37).

Glory be to God for His wonderful gift! Don't think of the church as just someplace you go, think of it as the great and glorious institution God intended. Do not take it for granted, but work as hard as you can in it for the rest of your lives. You will be glad you did when you men and women are converted to Christ, your brethren edified, and spend eternity with God!