

## THE LOVE OF GOD

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Words often become misused. And when a word becomes misused its true meaning often gets lost in the jumble of nuances and colloquialisms. The word *love* is just such a word. Today our word *love* can mean anything from the highest expression of self-sacrifice and devotion to no more than lustful self-gratification or a fondness for a particular flavor of ice cream. When a boy tells a girl he loves her, quite often what he really means is, *I desire you in the worst possible way and can't wait to gratify my raging hormones.* Often it means no more than a person has warm, sentimental feelings for another. Knowing that the word *love* can have multiple meanings, the Greeks had four *love*-words to express various aspects of love. The word *eros*, where we get our word *erotic*, is not even used in the New Testament due to its association with pagan practices. Family love, especially the love between parents and children is expressed by the word *storge*. A third word for *love*, *philia*, lends itself to the name of *the city of brotherly love*, Philadelphia, and expresses the love of friendship, liking, warm affection, and attractive appeal. Probably the one most familiar to Christians and non-Christians is the word *agape*, and because it is so popular it is often misunderstood. It is the love of choice. Personal appeal or attraction has nothing to do with it. God does not love us because we are so attractive and appealing, but because He chose to love.

God's love for man has been the subject of innumerable sermons, books, speeches, and articles, as well it should. There is no greater truth than, *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us* (Rm 5:8). But there has also been a great deal of erroneous, harmful, syrupy, sentimental, and misleading information propagated by people who impose their own understanding on what the Bible teaches. Many have changed *God is love* (1 Jn 4:8) into *love is God*, thus replacing the God of the Bible with a god whose nature consists of only one attribute. While much has been said about God's love of us, comparatively

little has been said concerning *our* love of God. What sort of response should come from people who claim to believe that God does in fact love them?

To tell most people today that God loves *them* comes as no surprise. That's His job, right? After all, what's not to love? But ask someone if *they love God*, and you are likely to be answered with a blank expression. It is like asking someone if they love broccoli, they know it is supposed to be good for them, but they can't stomach a steady diet. No matter that this is the greatest commandment, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind;"* (Lk 10:27; cf. Dt 6:5). Nevertheless, if pressed, the vast majority of people who profess to be Christians, and even some who don't, would also profess to have a love for God. But what does it mean to love God *with all your mind*? It means to love God as He really is, and as He has revealed Himself in Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ. It means to think rightly of God and not impose on Him our own prejudices of what we want God to be like. It means to worship Him as He really is and not a god of our own imagination. In the process of leading a Samaritan woman . . . an ostracized member of an ostracized ethnic group . . . to a true knowledge of Himself, Jesus told her, *"You (second person plural, i.e. the Samaritans) worship that which you do not know,"* (Jn 4:22). Sadly, this statement has become all too true of the vast majority of the visible church. Every Sunday, buildings which people call churches are brimming with people worshipping a God they do not know, nor do they have any desire to know, but rather are worshipping a god of their own imagination.

It is a simple fact that no one can love that which they do not know. A person can be physically attracted to and lust after another person whom they do not know, but they cannot truly love what they do not know; thus the reason why most people get to know one another before they fall in love and get married. This is what keeps internet dating sites in business; the desire to get to know another person. The heart cannot be drawn to that which it has no understanding. Without an understanding there is no inducement to love. Before a person can love, they must have some knowledge of the object of their affection, otherwise their affection has no object, and this is contrary to human nature

and all rational thinking. Knowledge is indispensable to love, and love is impossible without knowledge. If, however, a person's love is based on inaccurate, misleading, or faulty knowledge, then their love is based on what they *imagine* a person to be, not on who they really are. When a person discovers that the object of their affection is not who they imagined, they are faced with two options, either they can ignore the new information and continue thinking as they always have, or they accept this information as true which will affect the nature of the love they hold for that person. Based on this new knowledge love will either strengthen, remain unchanged, weaken into indifference, turn to dislike, and even to hatred.

Sadly the love which most people claim to hold for God is based on misinformation, inept teaching, and their own opinion. Therefore they have a mistaken and inaccurate knowledge of God. They love God as they *imagine* Him to be, not as He really is. And when they are confronted with God as He is they either reject this new knowledge and hold to the god they love, or their professed love will almost always turn to hostility and hatred. The God they love with all their mind is the god of their own imagination, not the God of the Bible. When one or more of God's attributes threatens a person's own perception of what God is like, then they will deny that attribute, thus ungodding God.

For instance, in order to preserve their perception of God is love+a person will deny God's holiness, His justice, His righteousness, His wrath, and His immutability or unchangeableness because to them these attributes seem incompatible with love. But without His holiness, God's love would be nothing more than emotional attachment; His patience would be indulgence of sin and His mercy no more than a doting fondness. Since His holiness is the principle subject of angelic praise (Is 6:3; Rv 4:8), and the glory of God, to deny God this attribute is worse than saying there is no God at all. It is one thing to deny the being of God, it is quite another to ascribe impurity, ineptness, inequity, weakness, or malice to God. The one who denies the being of God makes Him nothing, but the one who denies the holiness of God turns Him into a deformed, sullied, and detestable god. The holiness of God is so unique to Him that it can no more be

denied than His omnipotence, omnipresence, or omniscience. Since all sin is evil and only evil, and there is not the least bit of goodness in it, God can only abhor it wherever He finds it, *"For you are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; no evil dwells with you"* (Ps 5:3). He does not hate sin in one person and indulge sin in another, or hate one sin more than another, but loathes it wherever He finds it, *"You hate all who do iniquity"* (Ps 5:5b); *"Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You cannot look on wickedness with favor"* (Habakkuk 1:13).

Yet the god most people profess to love doesn't take sin all that seriously. In fact most people are not even sure if sin is still sin. Today the greatest sin is to identify and expose sin as sin. This is why the darkness hates the light and will not come to the light, *"lest his deeds be exposed"* (Jn 3:20). Exposed as what? Sin of course, evil. But isn't this what Christians are commanded to do? *"And do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but even expose them;"* (Eph 5:11). Love does not condone, rationalize, or justify sin; rather it lovingly confronts sin as sin. But in today's church culture confronting sin is considered one of the most unloving things a person can do. The person who confronts sin is usually quickly reprimanded with Matthew 7:1, *"Judge not lest you be judged,"* as though Jesus is forbidding us from being discerning or making any value judgments. In fact Matthew 7:1 has replaced John 3:16 as the most quoted verse by church-going people. Rarely is the context of this verse taken into consideration. Never mind that five verses later Jesus teaches, *"Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine"* (Mt 7:6), and in verse 15 Jesus tells us to, *"Beware of the false prophets"*. How are we to know the dogs, swine, and false prophets if we do not judge? So when people quote Matthew 7:1, what they usually mean is, *"do not expose my sin as sin; do not identify my behavior as sin, and do not tell me that God hates what I am doing."* They, in reality are the ones making the value judgment. They are saying it is wrong for someone to expose their sin as sin. They judge exposing sin as sin to be unloving. Their god would never be so unloving.

The fact that God hates sin doesn't deter unrepentant people from religion, it doesn't mean they avoid church; they just avoid the true God. This is why people

imagine God to be other than He is, because their god will not expose their sin for what it is . sin. They love their sin more than they love God, so they create a god who accommodates their sin. The more we love God the more we will hate sin, especially our own, because sin is opposed to the One we love. But the more someone loves sin, especially their own, the more they hate God because God is opposed to what they love. This is why people who hate God create their own god; one who will approve of what they love.

Those who prefer to think of %God is love+and only love, forget that the primary object of God's love is Himself, not mankind. God loves Himself above all else. He is the supreme object of His love. God loves all that is holy, righteous, good, just, and pure. Since God is the epitome of holiness He cannot but love Himself more than He loves any creature which is less holy than Himself. As created beings the angels do not share the same degree of holiness as God. Angelic holiness is a derived holiness given to them by God, but God is holy in Himself. He is jealous of His holiness, of His glory, and of His righteousness. God can no more jeopardize these attributes without jeopardizing His own nature. If He were to be other than He is He would cease to be God. *%am the LORD, that is my name; I will not give My glory to another, nor my praise to graven images+(Is 42:8).*

God loves Himself too much to expose His nature to impurity simply to accommodate who we think He should be and what we think He should be like. Must God surrender His holiness just because we have lost ours? Must God alter His requirement of holiness in His creatures just because the creature refuses to be holy? This is where people will deny the immutability of God; they want God to lower His standards of holiness. They imagine God would be more loving if He didn't take sin so seriously. They think God can be better now than He was in the Old Testament. But if God could become more loving, then He has not always been the most loving Being, which means His love was at some time deficient. If God could change for the better then He would not have always been perfect, and if He could change for the worse then He would be less than perfect and no longer be God. The testimony of Scripture is

clear, *%But You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end+(Ps 102:27); %Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow+(Jm 1:17).* God does not approve of evil, He does not solicit anyone to evil, He does not instigate any evil, and He does not tempt anyone to evil (Jm 1:13-15). God can never will, encourage, condone, rationalize, or legitimize sin in any person. He is not fondly indulgent or benevolently understanding of anyone's sin. God so hates sin in every form, and loves His holiness so supremely that He was willing to pour out His wrath on His own Son rather than allow sin to remain forever and disparage His holiness. Only God Himself can satisfy His own holy wrath against sin. Only a perfectly holy being can satisfy perfect holiness. No lesser holiness than the holiness of God could ever satisfy God's holy requirements. Neither the derived holiness of angels, nor the sin tainted work of the creature could ever satisfy God's holy and righteous justice.

A Christian's justification is not the byproduct of the imperfect works of a creature, but is based on an exact and infinite righteousness as great as the holiness which we have offended, that is, the righteousness of Christ, *%not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (Phil 3:9).* True saving faith is a lovingly obedient faith, *%If you love Me you will keep My commandments+(Jn 14:15; cf. 14:21, 23, 24).* True faith is a purifying faith, *%who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14).* A person that has been transformed from a sinner to a saint, who truly loves God, also bears the image of God. And the image of God which they bear is His holiness. We cannot be changed into His omnipotence, or His omniscience, or His omnipresence, but we are changed into His holiness, *%but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; (1 Pt 1:15).* No one can be a partaker of the blessings of salvation that is not a partaker of the Divine nature.

So much of the church today seems to think that holiness is an unnecessary, or at least optional, part of what it means to be a Christian. Some of the most popular

preachers today are those who use profanity and crass sexual innuendo from the pulpit. They engage in gutter humor all in the name of contextualization; that is, trying to be relevant to an unholy culture. Holiness holds no entertainment value. There is no fun in being holy. Holiness does not gratify the flesh and titillate the senses, and above all holiness is very counter productive when you are trying to attract a crowd. But hating evil and loving holiness is part of what it means to love God, *"Hate evil, you who love the Lord,"* (Ps 97:10); *"Seek good and not evil...Hate evil, love good,"* (Amos 5:14, 15); *"Love the LORD, all you His godly ones"* (Ps 31:23). When God's requirement for holiness is minimized or ignored it simply demonstrates a person's professed love for God is nothing but a bunch of tommyrot. *"He does not despise evil"* (Ps 34:4) is a characteristic of the ungodly. Not only do most not despise evil, they actually enjoy it. Evil is their main source of entertainment. God doesn't seem to mind. After all, no one has been consumed by fire from heaven like Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-3); no one has dropped dead in church like Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).

Many people confuse God's *patience* with His love. They think that since they have never suffered any immediate judgment or long-term consequences for their sin therefore God loves them too much to judge them and has reconciled Himself to their sin, or is not really all that concerned with them. Kind of a cosmic version of, *"Oh well, boys will be boys."* But the apostle Peter wrote that we are to *"regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation;"* (2 Pt 3:15). In other words, by being patient and not immediately judging a person's sin God is graciously giving people an opportunity to repent and turn from their sin to a lovingly obedient relationship with Him. For someone to interpret God's patience as either apathy toward sin or an unwillingness to judge, simply proves they worship what they do not know.

The apostle Paul asked and answered an interesting *"what if"* question in his letter to the Roman Christians, *"What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction"* (Rm 9:22)? It would be no violation of God's nature for Him to *demonstrate His wrath and make His power known* by immediately judging sinners. This

would not make Him an unloving God; it would make Him a just and holy God. It is God's patience, not His love which prevents Him from judging sin immediately; *%For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed+* (Mal 3:6). So, why is God so patient? Paul answers, *%And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory"* (9:23). The motivation for God's patience is His love for Himself and His own glory; it is to *make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy*. How can those who claim to be beneficiaries of His patience and the recipients of His divine mercy not help loving and adoring such a mercifully patient God? How can they not ascribe to Him all the glory that is due His name? How can they not live to please and honor Him? In light of such patience and mercy how can we not deny all our own lusts and desires, even our very life, renounce all our own righteousness as filthy rags, and love Him above all else? But still, in spite of all this, most people interpret God's patience as the love of an over-indulgent grandfather, they think His hatred of sin has diminished and His tolerance of evil has increased. Because people confuse God's patience with His love they think that God will override His holiness and righteousness. *%Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well+* (Is 7:13)? They think that since God has overlooked their sin in the past He will continue to do so; that He will stop being God and subordinate his holiness to their idolatry.

There are two ways of being an atheist. God can be denied either explicitly or implicitly; either by profession or in practice. One is to deny the existence of God, and the other is to deny Him one or more of His attributes. One denies His existence absolutely, while the other denies His existence as He is. Most people today, even most professing Christians, are practical atheists. But rather than admit they hate God, people will hold to their own understanding of God, they will concoct a god that conforms to their own conception of who God *should* be and what He *should* be like. They will reject God's own revelation of who He is . His nature, His character, His attributes, His laws and commands . and cling to the god of their own imagination because that is the god they love.



This is the god which most people who profess to love God truly love; God as they want Him to be, not as He is, and as such they really worship an idol of their mind, not the one true God revealed in the Bible. Instead of *being* transformed by the renewing of their mind (Rm 12:2), they use their mind to transform God. Instead of conforming their mind and life to God's word, they use their mind to conform God's word to their life. There can be no spiritual knowledge without there first being an intellectual, rational knowledge. It is impossible for someone to understand spiritually what they fail to understand intellectually. The message which Paul preached was *%God's wisdom+(1 Cor 2:7)*, that is, spiritual wisdom *%which none of the rulers of this age understood*; for if they had *understood* it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory+(1 Cor 2:8). The word translated *%understood* is the Greek word *ginosko* which means *%intelligent comprehension*.+When divine truth is rejected intellectually it can never be accepted spiritually and the mind remains darkened to spiritual truth (cf. 2 Cor. 2:14).

Through the prophet Jeremiah God warned Israel over and over to turn from their idols and return to Him, but their response was always the same, they *%walked in their own counsels and in the stubbornness of their evil heart, and went backward and not forward+(Jer 7:24)*. *%For we are going to follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart+(Jer 18:12)*. When people reject truth they become a law unto themselves, and they can appeal to no higher authority than themselves. Even though they claim to worship God and teach and preach of God; even though they draw large crowds and build big buildings, the god they teach and worship is a god of their own imagination. He is their own private, subjective god who conforms to how they think God should be, which is usually remarkably like themselves. This is why they love their god, because it is nothing more than self-love.

Sadly, this is the condition in which most of the professing church today finds itself. The spiritual condition of society and the church is virtually a mirror image of the conditions which prevailed during Jeremiah's time; *%An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: The prophets prophecy falsely, and the priest rule on their own authority; and My people love it so! But what will they do at the end of it+(Jer 5:30, 31)?*

When a preacher intentionally and habitually misrepresents the character of God, he is preaching a god of his own creation, not the true God of Scripture. When he twists and distorts Scripture for his own ends he is serving and worshiping self, not the God of Scripture. When he ignores portions of Scripture that contradict his view of God, he places himself among those who are *willingly ignorant* (2 Pt 3:5) of God as He is. When he substitutes entertaining tales, emotionally charged stories, syrupy sentimentality, ego boosting speeches, humanistic psychology, moralism, and weightless man-centered messages devoid of any doctrine for the sound, thorough exegesis of God's word, he simply feeds people's idolatrous misconceptions of God. Their view of God is never challenged and never corrected, they never learn the nature and character of the one true God, and they continue week after week and year after year holding onto a love based in ignorance. The God they love is the god of their own imagination; an idol of their mind.

When someone sincerely loves God as He is, each new discovery into the nature of God, each new insight into His character, each fresh understanding of His attributes is met with a sense of wonder, awe, and astonishment at the immensity, greatness, and power of God, as well as a humbling of our own self-importance and a sense of our own sinfulness and nothingness. Job discovered this after being interrogated by God, *"I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes"* (Job 42:5 ,6). And with this new knowledge comes a greater love for God, a greater awareness of our own inherent wickedness, and the recognition that our love falls far short of what God deserves. We desire to love Him more than we are currently capable of loving Him. A true knowledge of God does not provide an ego boost.

But when a person loves a god of their own imagination, each new discovery of God's true nature that threatens their perception of who God is only deepens their animosity for God and His word. Each revelation of His righteous and holy will that undermines their own lusts and desires is met with resistance and rejection. The prophet Jeremiah, even after being asked by the people to inform them of God's will (cf.

Jer 42:1-6), saw them flatly reject that will, *“As for the message that you have spoken to us in the name of the LORD, we are not going to listen to you! But rather we will certainly carry out every word that has proceeded from our mouths,”* (Jer 44:16-17a; cf. 43:2). They rejected God’s word because it conflicted with their predetermined course of action. They only went to Jeremiah to get confirmation for what they had already determined was right, not to ascertain God’s will. And when the word from God conflicted with their desires, they rejected His word. They were self-deceived (Jer 42:20, 21). Such people fall into the category of those whom Paul warned Timothy would characterize the majority of the professing church; those who will not tolerate sound doctrine (2 Tm 4:3). They reject truth in order to protect and defend the idol of their mind which they love. They never compare their god with the God of Scripture and say *“Is there not a lie in my right hand?”* (Is 44:20). All idolatry begins in the mind, imagining God to be other than He is. All of man’s imaginary gods are nothing more than impotent idols with no more reality than the idols Israel fashioned for itself. *“But they are altogether stupid and foolish in their discipline of delusion – their idol is wood!...Every man is stupid and devoid of knowledge; every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols; for his molten images are deceitful, and there is not breath in them. They are worthless, a work of mockery;”* (Jer 10:8, 14, 15). The image Israel gave to their idol was the image of God they had conceived in their mind; what they imagined God to be.

All of Israel’s idols were the idols of the surrounding cultures. Second Kings 17 records the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., as well as providing the reason why God inflicted His judgment. They *“walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD had driven out before the sons of Israel...they burned incense on all the high places as the nations did which the LORD had carried away to exile before them; and they did evil things provoking the LORD”* (17:8, 11). And even though God, through His prophets, repeatedly warned the nation to turn from their evil ways and obey His commands (17:13), *“they did not listen, but stiffened their neck like their fathers, who did not believe in the LORD their God. And they rejected His statutes and His covenant which He made with their fathers, and His warnings with which He warned them. And they followed vanity and became vain, and went after the*

*nations which surrounded them, concerning which the LORD commanded them not to do like them” (17:14, 15). The history of Israel is characterized by spiritual adultery, %~~they~~ they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them,” (Jg 2:12). The heart of man has not changed. We have the same hearts they had. We are still drawn to the idols worshiped by the surrounding culture.*

This same spiritual adultery characterizes most of the professing church today. Did God not command the church to be in the world, but not of the world? Did He not say %~~Come~~ *Come out from their midst and be separate” (2 Cor 6:17)? Are we not commanded to set our mind on things above and not the things of this world (Col 3:1)? Are we not warned that %~~who~~ whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jm 4:4), and %~~For~~ *For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of God” (Eph 5:5)? Spiritual adultery is nothing new. It has been going on since mankind% fall into sin. The idols worshiped by much of the visible church are the idols of the surrounding culture; they are the gods of the peoples who are around us. And the churches which draw the largest crowds are the churches that pander to these idols . the idols of self-importance, self-gratification, self-fulfillment, and materialism . the idols of self and the world. The nation of Israel languished spiritually under the same kind of cultural Christianity and Sunday morning faith which dominates the visible church today; %~~Behold~~ *Behold, you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal, and walk after other gods that you have not known (i.e. gods of the surrounding cultures), then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’ – that you may do all these abominations” (Jer 7:8-10)? If a person% belief in God gives them a license to sin, if their assurance of salvation emboldens them to violate God% commands, if they think they can willfully and deliberately sin then presume upon God% grace and mercy to forgive them, then they do not believe in the God of the Bible (cf. Hb 10:26, 27), but a god of their own creation . a god who places a person% own wants, desires, and preferences above His own laws and commands, and even above His own***

holiness. Such people demonstrate that they love their own lusts and desires more than they love God.

When people impose their own understanding on God, when they imagine Him to be someone other than He is, they in essence believe the god of their own imagination is *more perfect* than God as He is revealed in His revelation. They find fault with God as He is. Perhaps He does not conform to their human sense of fairness, or is not as tolerant of sin as they would like Him to be. Perhaps His demands seem too strict, His definition of sin too narrow, His assessment of man's nature too demeaning and pessimistic, His commands too restrictive and unyielding, His plan of salvation too exclusive, and His government too authoritarian. They prefer their own conception of God over what He has revealed Himself to be. They believe their own understanding of God to be superior to the Bible's revelation of God. Like the elders of Israel *"these men have set up their idols in their hearts"* (Ezk 14:3).

We are totally dependent on divine revelation to know anything about God, especially information regarding salvation, repentance, sin, our nature, and what God requires of us. The information which God has revealed about Himself in creation mankind suppresses in unrighteousness (cf. Rm 1:18-23). When people believe they can come to a true knowledge of God and hold true opinions of His nature and character apart from, or even contrary to, His own self-revelation in Scripture, they are simply attempting to think and act independently of God. They reject the authority and sufficiency of God's word and elevate their own opinion as the ultimate authority. But no creature can live independent of the Creator; *"for Him we live and move and exist"* (Ac 17:28). The atheist and pagan as well as the most devoted Christian are all equally dependent on God for their very being. So if we are dependent on God for such a little thing as even our next breath (cf. Is 42:5), how much more are we dependent on God to know anything about Him? But ever since his fall into sin, mankind has continuously lived in a fog of self-deception and strong self-delusion that he can live independent of God and be his own authority. No one can make truth untrue simply by rejecting it. Truth is always truth, even when no one believes it. *"Let God be found true, though every man*

*be found a liar,”* (Rm 2:4). Despite all of his beliefs to the contrary, man is incapable of knowing God apart from His divine revelation, the Bible.

God did not disclose the laws of science and mathematics, the discoveries of medicine and technology, nor the inventions of industry by means of special revelation. These are things man can learn by applying his God-given powers of reason, creativity, and rational thinking to observing and studying God's general revelation and the laws He has established to govern His creation. But if we are to know God as He really is, God Himself must reveal this information to us. Man can and does speculate and philosophize on the being of God, even the existence of God, but that is all it is . mere speculation divorced from God's revelation, not true knowledge. All one has to do is look at all the gods concocted by man over eons of human history to see that man could never by his own powers of reason fabricate the one true God revealed in Scripture, *“For the customs of the peoples are delusion; because it is wood cut from the forest, the work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool”* (Jer 10:3). No instance can ever be found where any people have come to a true knowledge of God apart from His revelation. The God of the Bible is so unlike anything man has ever imagined any god to be. He is unlike Allah of Islam, unlike Buddha, unlike Hinduism's millions of gods, unlike the god of liberal Christianity, unlike the New Age gods, unlike the pagan gods of Greece, Rome, Babylon, Persia, Egypt, Assyria, and so unlike the private god of someone's fertile and self-serving imagination. *“To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?...’To whom then will you liken Me that I should be his equal?’ says the Holy One”* (Is 40:18, 25); *“Is there any God besides Me, or is there any other Rock? I know of none”* (Is 44:8); *“For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens”* (Ps 96:5).

Not only did God reveal Himself in His word, but He actually took on human flesh and bones, and He lived among sinners to show us the true nature of God (cf. Jn 14:8, 9; Hb 1:3). This is why the most devout and fastidiously religious people in the world rejected and hated the Son of God . because He was so unlike what they imagined God to be, and so unlike what they expected the Messiah to be. The reason the Jews

rejected Jesus was because they had already rejected God as He is. Jesus confronted the religious people of His day with their willful rejection of biblical truth, *“And you do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent. You search the Scriptures (i.e. the Old Testament), because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you might have life...Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. For if you had believed Moses (and they didn’t) you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me. But if you do not believe his writings (and they didn’t) how will you believe My words+(Jn 5:39, 40,45-47)?* They did not believe Jesus because they did not believe the Bible, and they did not believe the Bible because just like their forefathers who were exiled to Assyria they did not believe in God. Their hope was in their own ability to keep the Mosaic Law, not in the One who gave the law. They worshiped a god of their own imagination. They had *“a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge+(Rm 10:2).* Despite all their scholarship, all their ostentatious religious practices, all their effort, all their devotion, all their external displays of religious ceremony and symbolism, and all their meticulous study, they never really knew God, *“they do not know the One who sent Me” (Jn 15:21b).* They rejected God’s righteousness and sought to establish their own (Rm 10:3). While claiming to be teachers of Scripture and experts in the law, in practice they actually rejected the very Scripture they professed to believe and hated the very God they professed to love. Jesus said, *“he who hates Me hates My Father also+(Jn 15:23),* and they hated Jesus enough to kill Him. It can’t get any clearer than that.

This same hatred for Jesus as He really is has overtaken much of the professing church. It is not an overt, wild-eyed, foaming at the mouth hatred like that of the Pharisees, but it is hatred all the same. It expresses itself in an aversion to teach the Jesus of the Bible and an unwillingness to preach the unvarnished truth of Scripture. In fact, very little of what calls itself the church is truly the church; that is, God’s called out ones. The church is composed exclusively of Christians, and the primary characteristic of a true Christian is love for God, love for Jesus, and love for His word. Demons believe in God, they know who Jesus is, and they shudder in terror (Jm 2:19), but they

do not love and fear Him. When gross biblical and theological incompetency and apathy characterize most of the church, when there is a willful rejection of truth, and man's wisdom and worldly methods and agendas dictates the ministry of the church, it simply reveals a deficiency in their love for God and His word.

This dearth of love for God is demonstrated in what most people look for when they are searching for a church. High on the list are things such as fellowship, friendliness, a fun atmosphere. I once saw a billboard advertising a church which read, "Our kids will love (this church), and so will you." Disneyland meets that criterion. Now that's the way to choose a church, find one that our kids will like. The same thing that appeals to our children is what appeals to the parents . self- gratification. Much of what people look for in a church could be found in a bar. They want a convenient location, plenty of parking, activities for the kids, nice restrooms. In other words, all the superficial stuff which has nothing to do with being a church. All these things are nice, but they have nothing to do with being the church. The criteria is carnal not spiritual. When results are the goal, then the methods and message will be tailored to achieve those results. This is true for everything from evangelism to worship. If the goal is to provoke a certain response or create an experience then means will be devised that accomplish the goal. When self-satisfaction is the motive then once a person is satisfied that's where they stop, but if love for God and His word is the motive, and God's glory is the goal then a person is never satisfied. Very rarely does anyone mention the in-depth teaching and preaching of Scripture, the equipping of disciples, spiritual growth and maturity, learning to think biblically, or leading a holy life set apart for God. But this is the sole mandate of the church. Jesus not only commissioned His church to "*make disciples*", but He also told them *how* to make disciples, "*teaching them to observe all that I commanded you*" (Mt 28:19, 20). Paul wrote that God gave the church "*pastors and teachers*" for the purpose of "*equipping the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ*" (Eph 4:11, 12). People are more willing to sacrifice the teaching and preaching of God's truth rather than all the other stuff offered by the church, but hardly ever are people willing to forego all the stuff in order be nourished on the pure milk of God's word. Peter told the churches of Asia, "*like newborn babies, long*



*for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation,”* (1 Pt 2:2). But instead of being like newborn babies who crave their mother’s milk, we tend to be more like spoiled brats at a candy counter screaming, “I want this, I want that. Give me this, give me that.” Rather than longing for the pure milk of the word, people lust after the stuff of the world. Hungry people only want to be fed, they only desire food, and they could care less about the ambiance. They desire the meal, not the china and silverware. When it comes to the church, most people today would rather have a cream-filled donut on a silver platter than a T-bone steak on a paper plate.

Two days before He was to be killed Jesus was leaving the temple in Jerusalem when some of His disciples began pointing out to Him the opulent splendor and magnificent architecture of the temple buildings (cf. Mt 24:1; Mk 13:1, Lk 21:5). They were obviously enthralled with all the superficial trappings and symbols of external religion. But Jesus was disgusted with the entire system. He was sickened by the corruption, self-indulgence, materialism, and incompetence of the spiritual leaders (cf. Mt 23). He was revolted by the fact that ritual, symbolism, and man-made rules had replaced a true love and devotion for God and His word. What looked good on the outside was in reality inside a putrid rotting mass of nauseating self-serving, self-gratifying hypocrisy. This is true of all false religion. The amount of symbols, rituals, and external religious activity is inversely proportional to the level of true spirituality. When there is no love for God as He is and for His word, then the void gets filled with religious stuff and a steady stream of gimmicky programs. As I write this it is nearing the month of October and already I am seeing churches displaying banners advertising one of the more recent gimmicks . Judgment House. This is supposed to be a sanctified haunted house where people attempt to depict the torments of hell, thereby hoping to scare at least a few people into making a profession of faith in Jesus. However, not only are these churches trying to capitalize off of the world’s morbid fascination with all that is dark and evil, and pandering to their insatiable desire to be entertained, but they trivialize the very real reality of hell, desensitize people to its agony, deny the sufficiency of Scripture, and turn faith in Jesus into some sort of fire insurance. If people thought they could avoid hell another way they would choose that. Wanting to avoid hell, and

repenting of sin and turning to Jesus with saving faith are two totally different things. Demons would like to avoid the torments of hell if they could. There is only one way to be a true church and that is the way mandated by God in Scripture . *%preach the word; in season and out of season+(2 Tm 4:2);* when it is popular and when it is unpopular. We are living in a time when the preaching of God's word is out of season. People prefer gimmicks to preaching. After all, gimmicks are so much more entertaining. People who profess to be Christians and groups that profess to be churches are accumulating for themselves teachers in accordance with their own fleshly, worldly and self-centered desires (cf. 2 Tm 4:3). They turn their ears from the truth and turn aside to myths (2 Tm 4:4); the gods of their own imagination.

The demands of Christ hold no attraction for the world, or for those who turn Christianity into self-improvement and a means of self-fulfillment. God's prescriptions for how He is to be worshiped hold no entertainment value, *%But as for me, by your abundant lovingkindness I will enter Your house, at Your holy temple I will bow in reverence for You%(Ps 5:7). %Worship the LORD with reverence, and rejoice with trembling+(Ps 2:11).* It is hard to imagine a more irreverent atmosphere than the Sunday morning *%worship+services* of most churches today. Call me a prude, but somehow I do not think the rock concert, party atmospheres and the bodily gyrations qualify as *%rejoice with trembling.+* Jesus' true disciples must deny self; they must deny all hopes, dreams, and ambitions for material prosperity, honor, popularity, comfort, and ease. They must take up a cross daily so as to crucify the flesh with its lusts and desires, and follow Jesus wherever He goes. This is not the fun, frivolous, self-absorbed life promoted by the majority of churches today. This does not sound like your best life now. This does not jive with the health, wealth, prosperity preachers that dominate so-called Christian television. This is not a rock concert, it is not a party. This is a reality far different than what the false teachers say you can create for yourself. This is the real *%destiny+of every true disciple;* so much for the church being a place of fun, frivolity, and entertainment. There is nothing flippant, frivolous, and entertaining about a cross. There is much, much joy, but there is definitely nothing frivolous or flippant.

The reason sin has so many followers is because it displays the best first. It promises your best life now. Sin offers immediate gratification. God's rewards are deferred until heaven. Sin offers self-indulgence. God offers self-denial. Sin offers this world. God offers a world to come. Sin shows the bait, not the hook. For the sake of generating numbers and worldly success much of the professing church has adopted Satan's strategy. And because it produces the desired results the strategy is not questioned. Satan shows the best first and saves the worst till last. God does the opposite; the wilderness always comes before the Promised Land, and suffering always comes before the glory. The sad fact is most people who go to church do not attend church to hear God's word, or to learn biblical truth, or to grow in their knowledge of God so they can love Him more and worship Him better. Most only want to have what they already think they know reinforced, or at least not challenged.

The apostle Paul declared that he ~~solely~~ testified to both Jews and Gentiles the whole purpose of God (cf. Ac 20:21, 23; 28:23). *Diamarturomai* is the Greek word translated ~~solely~~ and is used 15 times in the New Testament, and always means ~~to~~ declare emphatically, especially in the sense of a warning. In other words, this is serious business with dire consequences for rejecting or being mistaken about these truths. Preaching is not a pep talk, it is not a motivational speech, it is not syrupy sentimentality, and it is not emotional manipulation. Preaching is imparting God's truth to people. But this does not draw a crowd; but then again, a crowd is not a church. A group of unregenerate people who have had their self-serving and fleshly interests enticed is not a church. In fact, those who resort to such tactics are by definition, according to the apostle Peter, false teachers; *For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality,* (2 Pt 2:18). A group of worldly people who have no love for God's word and no love for Jesus as He is, is not a church. A crowd that is enthralled with a god of their own imagination; who flock to hear messages designed to boost their self-esteem is not a church. A crowd with a smattering of Christians is not a church; it is a crowd with a smattering of Christians. The same mix can be found at Wal-Mart on any given day, but no one would identify Wal-Mart as a church.

The true church is not a building, it is not just a group of people getting together to do religious stuff. Being a member of a denomination does not make you part of the church; being a member of a church does not make you part of the church. The true church is a living, breathing organism under the headship of Christ, bound by the authority of God's word, and characterized by love for God, love for Christ, and a love for Scripture. It has no mandate other than that prescribed by God. It has a stewardship to which it is to be faithful. When the church deviates from the divine mandate, then it ceases to be the true church.

Why is the church having so little impact in the world today, especially here in America? Because what calls itself the church is not the church; it cannot be what it is not. When what professes to be the church is not only in the world but also of the world; when it courts the world, mimics the world, uses worldly methods, pursues worldly goals and appeals to worldly desires, and in some cases uses worldly vulgar language and crass sexual innuendo from the pulpit, it serves no useful purpose for God's kingdom. It ceases to be a force for good and instead becomes a tool of Satan. If something is not true it is false, there is no middle ground, and all falsehood is spawned by Satan. He was a liar from the beginning and the father of lies.

First Thessalonians 1:9 records the apostle Paul's exuberance over the fact that the church in Thessalonica had *turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God,*". In other words, they had turned from serving the gods of their own imagination to serve God as He really is. Paul's enthusiasm would be quickly squelched by the direction in which most of the modern church has turned. Sadly, a large portion of the visible church has turned to its own idols of materialism, success, entertainment, and self-esteem, to their own conceptions of God, and to their own methodologies and message, *from* the true and living God. Just like during the days of Jeremiah the church has traded the true God and His word for that which are no gods. They have changed their glory for that which does not profit (cf. Jer 2:11). They have forsaken the fount of living waters to hew *for themselves* broken cisterns that can hold no water (cf. Jer 2:13);

cisterns of man's schemes, marketing strategies, trendy names, demographic surveys, human wisdom, humanistic psychology, moralism, materialism, entertainment driven worship, political activism, sentimental and effeminate views of Jesus, self-esteem, self-fulfillment, contextualization, and whatever new gimmicky approach to ministry that finds its way to the bookstore shelves and promises instant results and immediate gratification. When people forsake the true God they do not abandon religion, but they create their own god and their own ways of worshiping their god. They hew their own cisterns, and they rely on their own abilities, their own methods, and their own wisdom and philosophies. God's question to Israel is especially relevant today, *"How can you say, 'We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us'? But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie (i.e. they are perverting God's word) Behold, they have rejected the word of the LORD, and what kind of wisdom do they have"* (Jer 8:8, 9)? What kind indeed? The only kind people who have no love for God and His word can have . human wisdom corrupted by sin; broken cisterns.

The prevailing wisdom within the church today is, *"the end justifies the means."* Pragmatism dominates. If it produces the desired results, which is usually attracting more people, then whatever accomplishes that goal must be good, even if these methods violate God's clear principles and precepts for His church; even when these means are nothing more than appealing to people's narcissistic desire for self-gratification, and pandering to their idolatry of self and the world; and even when these schemes ignore, twist, and violate the means instituted by God whereby He grows His church. Such pragmatism simply reveals an appalling lack of confidence in God's word to accomplish what He said it would. *"If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead"* (Lk 16:31). If the means which God has instituted to grow His church are not sufficient, nothing else is. Those who adopt means other than those given by God admit they have more confidence in their own schemes than in God's means; they believe their own trendy methods to be superior to those instituted by God; and they think their "spirit-filled, uplifting" message is more powerful than God's word. It is nothing more than wicked unbelief, and unbelief is the expression of an absence of love for God. Since God can never approve of evil,

He can never approve of all the pragmatic approaches to ministry that have come to dominate the church, and for a church to adopt these types of gimmicky practices in the name of a holy God is to associate God with evil, which is blasphemous, and demonstrates the god they worship is not the god of the Bible, but one of their own invention.

Numbers and popularity equal a successful ministry, or so says the thinking which dominates most of the church today. The same criterion used to measure success in business is used to measure the success of a church. In fact, many churches have even started to expand their customer base by establishing multi-site locations. Like a family business these other locations are under the control of the founding family, but are run by hired managers. The fact that most of the people who make up their customer base are unregenerate, are biblically and theologically illiterate, and have no love for God as He is, well that's the price you pay for success. A customer is a customer. But didn't Jesus teach on the impossibility of loving God and worldliness at the same time? Didn't Jesus say, *"No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon"* (Lk 16:13). There is no getting around this principle. It is unchallengeable. There are no exceptions to this rule. It is very black and white with no shades of gray whatsoever. The nature of this principle is such that it is self-validated by the lifestyles people choose, the priorities they set, and the goals they pursue. People may try to deny this by their profession but they cannot deny it in their practice. A person who claims to love Jesus in their heart will also love Him in their practice.

But, just like the religious community of Jesus' lifetime, the vast majority of the church has been trying its level best to prove Jesus wrong. Just like the Pharisees, the church today scoffs, and in so doing only prove Jesus right. Why did the Pharisees scoff? Because they were *"lovers of money"* (Lk 16:14), and as such, not lovers of God. This doesn't mean they became atheists, rather they just imagined God to be other than He is. They imagined a god who actually encouraged the love of money and prosperity,

who doesn't mind fleshly indulgence and the perversion of His worship, and who thought self-promotion and self-glorification was a good thing, and who lived to satisfy their worldly and self-serving desires. In its lust for worldly success the church has simply demonstrated the timeless truth of Jesus' teaching. You still cannot serve two masters, and it is very clear which master most of the church has chosen to love and to serve and which it has chosen to hate and despise. *"How can you say, 'I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Baals'? Look at your way in the valley! Know what you have done!"* (Jer 2:23). The message, the practice, the goals, the lifestyle, and the priorities of the majority of the professing church and the majority of professing Christians is completely inconsistent with a true love for God as He is. This is as undeniable as the principle itself. Their practice denies their profession, *"They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed"* (Titus 1:16). Demas deserted the apostle Paul because he loved this present world (2 Tm 4:9), and this same love has captured the heart of the majority of the professing church. They have gone after their Baals.

The church has only *one* thing to offer which the world cannot duplicate . the truth. Everything else offered by the church, all its programs, all the fun activities, all its community service, all its entertainment driven ambiance . absolutely everything else done by the church can be and is counterfeited by the world, but it cannot counterfeit truth. The world cannot counterfeit the preaching and teaching of Scripture. It can and does pervert the Scripture, misuse Scripture, misinterpret Scripture, and distort the Scripture, but it has always done this; *"which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of Scriptures, to their own destruction"* (2 Pt 3:16). Only in the true church will someone find the biblical exposition of Scripture, the true knowledge of God, what He requires, how to be reconciled to Him, man's core problem and how to overcome it. Only the true church has the answers to all the world's problems.

Paul's first letter to Timothy was written with a specific purpose in mind, *"I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God,*

*which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth*+(1 Tm 3:14, 15). Notice Paul's threefold description of the church. First, it is composed of *the household of God*, that is true Christians. Secondly, it is the church *of the living God*; that is, God as He really is, not a figment of someone's imagination. And thirdly, it is *the pillar and support of the truth*. Let's look at these one at a time.

First, the church is made up exclusively of those who have been transformed by the Holy Spirit and who truly love Jesus Christ. Their faith is an active faith, not just mental assent to a set of facts. They have repented of their sin, they are crucifying their fleshly and worldly desires, they have abandoned all hope in their own righteousness, and their hearts desire is to live in obedience to God's word and for His glory. Non-Christians attend church and become members of a particular church, but they are not part of the household of God, and therefore not part of the true church. One does not become part of the household of God by joining a church, by being baptized, by going through some form of religious education or performing some religious ceremony or keeping a bunch of man-made rules. No one becomes a member of God's household by avoiding certain vices and behaviors. Morality will not get you into God's household. A person is not born into the household of God because they have Christian parents. Being an American does not automatically make someone part of the household of God. No one can be good enough to become part of the household of God. Paul is not including all of mankind in the household of God. He specifically confines the term to the church, *which is the church*. People can do a lot of things to look like a church, they can play church, but only the household of God can be the church.

Secondly, Paul is not talking about just any church; rather He specifically calls it *the church of the living God*. In other words, the true church is not only made up of true Christians, but they worship the true God, the *living* God. God as He is. Not an imaginary god, not the product of someone's own imagination, but God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus told the Samaritan woman, the same woman who worshiped what she did not know, that those who worship God, *must* worship Him in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:24). That word *must* is



the Greek word *dei* and indicates a divine necessity. This is the way which God has determined He must be worshiped, and any deviation from His prescribed form is not only unacceptable but is in direct disobedience to His command. In other words, it is not worship, but rebellion. It is not good; it is evil, sinful, and idolatrous. Worship that worships God in spirit and truth is essentially God-centered, not man-centered. It is rendering to God such honor and devotion in which the entire heart is involved, and that is in full conformity with the truth of God revealed in His word. Sadly, the vast majority of worship practiced within the church today is designed to appeal to the senses and emotions. Everything from the music to the message is geared to elicit an emotional response . a %worship experience.+But God is Spirit and must be worshiped in spirit and truth. True worship flows from the *mind*, the spirit of man, not the carnal flesh. Worship that focuses on outward expressions and emotional highs is usually lacking in spiritual devotion. Just as it is human nature to gravitate to what appeals to the flesh and satisfies the senses (Gn 3:6), so people naturally gravitate to a carnal worship. People want to worship in a way that gratifies their senses. This is why people select a church based on carnal criteria, and as a result their worship is carnal and false, not spirit and truth. Just as Eve's mind was corrupted from a pure devotion to God (2 Cor 11:3), so our minds are easily corrupted by what appeals to our senses.

God is as much displeased now with a carnal worship as He was with Israel's meaningless sacrifices ( Is 1:11-14). They thought God was as pleased with their outward observance as they were, even though they lacked the internal worship of God; a reverential fear of Him; trust in His word and nature; a lovingly obedient disposition ( 1 Sm 15:22, 23; Hos 6:6). They never gave themselves; they never sought to know Him, and imagined God to be as superficial as they (Ps 50:21). It is impossible to worship and honor God as we ought unless we know Him as He is. It is impossible to know Him apart from His revelation of Himself. Only God can acquaint us with His own nature. Without a knowledge of God and His true nature people will worship a god of their own imagination; one that is remarkably like themselves. Not only are we dependent on revelation to know God, but also to know *how* to worship Him . we must be told from heaven what worship is fit for the God of heaven.

Truly spiritual worship consists in a love for God as He is, the living God, not a god of our own imagination. It involves communion with Him; trust in Him and His word; sincere aims at His glory; and a deep abiding affection. Affection is constant and permanent whereas emotion is fleeting, superficial, and temporary. Affection manifests itself in obedience (Jn 14:15, 21, 23) and a holy, crucified life (Gal 2:20; 6:14). To worship God and serve Him only with our body and not our spirit is hypocrisy; to serve God with our spirit but not our body is sacrilege; to give Him neither is atheism.

Thirdly, Paul calls the church ~~the~~ *the pillar and support of the truth*. Notice, the truth does not support the church, but the church supports the truth. To not support the truth is the same as undermining the truth. It is the same as being hostile to the truth. If a church minimizes the teaching and preaching of truth; if it seeks to attract people by any means other than the truth; if it compromises or trivializes truth; if the preacher cannot support his message with Scripture or must twist Scripture to support his message; if people rely on extra-biblical revelation to support their claims or ignore or reinterpret what contradicts their claims; if they replace the wisdom of God with the wisdom of man; then it no longer qualifies as a church because it fails to support the truth. If it is not supporting truth it is supporting something other than the truth, and anything other than the truth is a lie. And since Satan is the father of lies, any church that fails to support the truth is really doing the work of Satan, not God. The god they support and teach is the god of their own imagination, an idol of their mind, not the true God. And behind every idol is a demon (1 Cor 10:20).

We live in a media-saturated society that expects and looks for almost nonstop entertainment, and this has not been lost on most of the church-growth gurus. The sermon has been reduced to no more than a quickie, sentimental devotional or a man-centered motivational speech, while the rest of the service is taken up with video-clips, Power-Point displays, concert-style musical performances, and polished dramas . all specifically designed to give people the impression they have actually worshiped when in fact all they have done is gratify the flesh. But all true worship is centered on the teaching and preaching of Scripture. The pattern is found in the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah. *“For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to*

*practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances to Israel+(Ez 7:10). And what was the result of all of Ezra's study and teaching? We find the answer in Nehemiah, "And Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which had been made for the purpose...And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up...[they] explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading" (Neh 8:4, 5, 7, 8). And how did the people respond? "And all the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them+(Neh 8:12). The end result of truth was worship. The end result of an emotional high is a fleeting good feeling. Without the in-depth, verse-by-verse exposition of Scripture; without *translating to give the sense so they understood the reading*, there can be no true worship. A sermon is only as powerful as it is accurate. When the true meaning of Scripture is ignored, glossed over, misrepresented and misinterpreted the message is all hot air. People cannot worship a God they do not know, but they will always worship what they love the most, and since they do not know or love God because His word is not preached, they worship what they know and love the most . self and the world.*

Buzzwords are the new trend in the church today, words like ~~authentic~~, missional, relevant, and radical+are used by churches to let people know that they are on the cutting edge; that this is not your grandmother's church, and it is definitely not that old time religion. People are promised ~~Spirit-filled messages+~~, whatever those are. But buzzwords do not transform lives or save souls, and sermons that are devoid of Scripture or butcher Scripture are not Spirit-filled. They may be full of something, but it is not the Spirit. The principle means by which the Holy Spirit transforms lives is through the teaching and preaching of God's word. The church does not need new buzzwords, it needs the Bible. It doesn't need polished performances, it needs preaching. It doesn't need gimmicks, it needs the truth. The church is not about being ~~radical+~~, it is about being biblical. The Christian life is not about becoming less self-indulgent, but dying to self, crucifying the flesh, dying to the world, and walking by the Spirit. There is nothing ~~radical+~~ about being less hedonistic and more ascetic. Being ~~radical+~~ still feeds the

flesh and leads to spiritual pride, *%These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence+(Col 2:23).* A person can be motivated to give up their stuff by something other than a love of God. They could just as likely be motivated by a love of self. Most people would gladly give up their possessions rather than die on a cross.

The apostle Paul spoke of a day when the majority of people who make up the professing church would *%not endure sound doctrine+(2 Tm 4:3).* Instead they would rather *%have their ears tickled*". They prefer to be entertained, to have their ego boosted, and to accommodate Scripture to their life, to have salvation without repentance rather than be confronted with the implications of biblical doctrines. Sound doctrine is truth and truth always has implications for our lives. People do not reject truth just because it is truth, but because of the implications of that truth. When those implications conflict with their own presuppositions and desires then they reject that truth. They want to dictate the terms of salvation, they want to define what is sinful and what is not, and they definitely do not want to have their own presuppositions and opinions of God challenged. So, they *%accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires+*, that is, teachers who will accommodate their idolatry and not challenge their presuppositions. In fact, so many of these kinds of teachers have been accumulated by professing Christians that they have come to dominate the pulpits. This is the church in America today. And when confronted with this reality, most of the church today responds the way Israel responded to Jeremiah, *%Now it will come about when you tell this people all these words that they will say to you, 'For what reason has the LORD declared all this great calamity against us? And what is our iniquity, or what is our sin which we have committed against the LORD our God?' Then you are to say to them, 'It is because your forefathers have forsaken Me,' declares the LORD, 'and have followed other gods and served them and bowed down to them; but Me they have forsaken and have not kept My law. You too have done evil, even more than your forefathers; for behold, you are each one walking according to the stubbornness of his own evil heart, without listening to Me'" (Jer 16:10-12).*

Everyday more and more churches prostrate themselves before the idols of our culture. Everyday more and more pastors compromise God's word, capitulate to the spirit of the age, and bow to the cultural pressure to call evil good and good evil, to substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, and bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter (Is 5:20). It is happening at every level, from the multi-thousand mega-church to the little country church in the dell. Pastors have been accumulated who will provide a worldly message and worldly worship for worldly people, *"they are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them"* (1 Jn 4:5). God makes it very clear throughout Scripture that the value which people place on the preaching of God's word is the value they place on God; *"And the LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers...but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets,"* (2 Chron 36:15, 16); *"For they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel"* (Is 5 :24); *"If they kept My word, they will keep yours also"* (Jn 15:20). When people place little value on Scripture, they have little use for true preaching. Worldly people love worldly messages. The world loves its own, not God (Jn 15:19). The interest and love which people have for God's word is directly proportional to the interest and love they have for God. The animosity and indifference to God's word is equal to the animosity and indifference to God. It is just as impossible to separate God from His word, as it is to separate a love for God from a love for His word. You cannot love what you do not know.

Jesus makes a remarkable comparison in His *Good Shepherd* discourse in John chapter 10 where He also makes two of the seven *I am* statements found in John's gospel; *"I am the door"* (10:9), and *"I am the good shepherd"* (10:11,14). His comparison is found in verses 14 and 15, *"I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep."* Those two little words *"even as"* is the Greek word *kathos* and is a comparative conjunction. Notice the comparison, *"I know My own and My own know Me, even as; just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father."* In order to make this double-sided comparison a little more clear, we could phrase it like this, *"I know My own, even as the Father knows Me, and My own know Me, even as I know the*

Father.+Four times Jesus uses the word *know* to describe the relationship that exists between He and His Father, and between Him and those who are His own, i.e. His sheep. This is more than just an intellectual knowledge of each others existence. This is more than a mere emotional experience. This is an intimate experiential knowledge that is analogous to and rooted in the intimacy between the Father and the Son. This is astounding. This is no mere superficial attraction. This kind of knowledge is not the byproduct of shallow teaching and even shallower worship. It is not the result of pep talks and pursuing self-gratification. No one who rejects Jesus as He is, and substitutes a Jesus of their own imagination can have this kind of intimate, loving fellowship and personal experiential knowledge of Jesus. In fact it is this mutual knowledge that makes certain that the sheep will follow their Shepherd, and only their Shepherd (cf 10:3, 4). True sheep will never follow a false shepherd; they will never follow a Jesus of their own or someone else's imagination. True sheep know and love the true Shepherd, but you cannot love what you do not know.

Two men from the New Testament who shared an uncommonly close relationship to Jesus provide the greatest illustration of this truth. The great difference between Peter and Judas was that Peter loved Jesus and Judas did not. Peter loved Jesus because he was one of Jesus's sheep, therefore he knew Jesus, he knew who Jesus is, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"* (Mt 16:16). Judas did not *know* Jesus because he was not one of Jesus's sheep. To Judas, Jesus was simply the means to an end. Jesus was the means by which he would achieve all his self-serving goals and his own self-fulfillment. Judas hoped to ride on Jesus's coat tails to a position of power and influence. Judas could be the poster child for those churches who promote Jesus as the means of worldly success, who advertise, *"Come and see what God can do for you."* None of the other disciples ever suspected that Judas, or Peter would betray Jesus. There was no real outward evidence, but there was a huge difference in their motives for following Jesus. One was motivated by his love of self, the other by his love of Jesus. One followed Jesus because of who He is, the other followed for the perceived worldly advantages. Peter was willing to sacrifice himself for Jesus, but Judas was only interested in self-gratification. To Judas Jesus was the means to an end, but for Peter Jesus was the end, He was the ultimate goal, *"Lord, to whom shall we go?"*

*You have words of eternal life*+(Jn 6:68). This is true of all who truly love Jesus, and what we love we want to know better. Judas loved a Jesus of his own imagination, a political Messiah. And when it turned out that Jesus was not who or what he had imagined, that Jesus had not come to advance his own self-interest, then Judas love turned to betrayal.

When Jesus is only the means to an end, once that end is realized, or it becomes clear that Jesus is not going to satisfy someone's desire; then the love affair with Jesus is over. For Judas it became clear that Jesus was not going to be the means by which he would realize all his worldly and materialistic desires. It became clear that Jesus's message and mission was contrary to his worldly and self-seeking ambitions. In Jesus's economy honor and wealth were to be despised, self was to be denied, the flesh was to be crucified, personal ambition was to be subjected to His will, the world was to be renounced, self-confidence was to be distrusted, suffering was to be patiently endured, the cross carried, the reproach of man borne cheerfully, self-effort was to count for nothing, the greatest is a slave and the poorest are rich, the wise of the world are foolish and the foolish wise, sin is to be forsaken, and holiness of life pursued. In short, it condemned all that the world esteemed virtuous, valuable, and praiseworthy, all that the world lusts after and desires and expends all its efforts to gain, and exposed our innate blindness to spiritual truth, our utter inability to save ourselves, and forces us to depend not on ourselves, but solely on God's grace and power. This is not what the vast majority of people go to church to hear. This is the sound doctrine which people will not endure. This is why they choose teachers who will affirm their intrinsic goodness, confirm their infinite worth, and pander to their narcissistic desires for self-gratification. Jeremiah complained to God that no one was listening to his preaching, *To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold, their ears are closed, and they cannot listen. Behold, the word of the LORD has become a reproach to them; they have no delight in it*+(Jer 6:10). This describes the majority of the professing church today to a tee.

Peter's denial was motivated by self-preservation, which is a natural human instinct. Judas's betrayal was motivated by greed, lust for power and influence, and self-

gratification. It only took one look from Jesus to crush Peter (Lk 22:61), whereas Judas could walk right up to Jesus, look Him in the face, give Him an affectionate greeting of friendship, hear Jesus question his loyalty, and all without the slightest twinge of conscience. Peter's sorrow was because he had sinned against the One he loved. Judas's remorse was because of the circumstances his sin had created, he was guilty of innocent blood. Judas loved himself too much to live with the guilt of his sin. Most people avoid sin because of the harmful side effects. Self love is the motive, not love for Jesus. If they could sin without harm to themselves then there would be no restraint. But quite often not even personal loss is a restraint to sin. People will sacrifice their health, wealth, reputation, careers, and family just to satisfy their lust. Some even sacrifice the lives of their own children.

So, who do you love . the Jesus of Peter or the Jesus of Judas; the Jesus of Scripture or the Jesus of your own imagination; Jesus as He is or Jesus as you want Him to be? Most love the latter and are offended and scandalized by the former because He is so unlike who and what they want Him to be. They love the Jesus of Judas, the Jesus who is merely the means to an end, and they hate the Jesus of Peter, the Jesus who is an end in Himself.

Mankind has always found a way to exploit, mar, and pillage God's blessings for his own personal profit, to desecrate what is holy and corrupt what is pure, and by so doing demonstrates that he actually despises rather than venerates and esteems God's blessing, *"I brought you into the fruitful land, to eat its fruit and its good things. But you came and defiled My land, and My inheritance you have made an abomination"* (Jer 2:7). The institution of the church and the person of Jesus are no exceptions to this rule. Materialistic and worldly people have succeeded in turning most of the church into something it was never intended to be . a commercially viable and highly profitable enterprise, a source of entertainment popular with the masses, and a place where the unregenerate can comfortably congregate to worship their idols of the culture and the god of their own imagination, and be affirmed in their sin. The pulpit has been prostituted for personal gain, truth sacrificed on the altar of commercial success, while at the same time people perish for a lack of knowledge.



The true church will always persevere and survive, but it won't be found where truth has been replaced by human wisdom, syrupy sentimentality, emotional manipulation, ego boosting pep talks, party atmospheres, gimmicky entertainment, gutter humor, and crass language; where people are told they, like God, can will something into existence and create their own reality and determine their own destiny. The true church will not be found making friends with the world or serving another master. The true church follows the true Shepherd because they know and love Him. The true church is characterized by a love of God and a love of His word.

About six months before He was to be killed, while He was attending the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus told some Jews who had professed a belief in Him, *“If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine;”* (Jn 8:31). A few verses later, after they had demonstrated they had no intention of abiding in His word, Jesus tells them the reason they have rejected His words, *“But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me”* (Jn 8:45). Did you catch that? The reason these people, who only a few moments earlier had professed a belief in Jesus but now rejected what He says, is precisely because what He says is the truth. This is because the unregenerate mind has a natural loathing for spiritual truth, just as darkness has a natural aversion to light. This is usually the way it is with people who make superficial professions of faith. They believe in Jesus, until Jesus begins teaching, then their initial profession turns to intense hatred. But this hatred is not expressed directly against Jesus; they still love Jesus . their Jesus. Rather their animosity is turned to the one who teaches Jesus as He is, just as Jesus said they would (cf. Jn 15:18-20). It is precisely these same types of people that make up the majority of the professing church today . people who have an aversion to truth. Their aversion is not necessarily for the Bible per se, but for what the Bible says about God, about salvation, about us, His will, sin, marriage, divorce, children, morality, money, the world, and the Christian life in general. Many will turn to God's word, but only to find support for their own ideas and opinions, not to have their thinking shaped by Scripture, not to submit their mind to the truth, not to love God with all their mind. When people turn to Scripture simply to find support for their own opinions, or for some pet theology, or for the god they love, they will typically find it every time, and in so doing simply prove that what they love is their own opinion, not the truth of Scripture.

And when they stumble across passages that contradict their own opinion, they will reject, ignore, or reinterpret them, thus revealing their natural aversion to truth.

God's word is clear on everything pertaining to life and godliness (2 Pt 1:2, 3). Scripture is completely sufficient to provide all the answers for all the problems of life. The problem is not a lack of clarity, but a lack of receptivity, a lack of love of God as He is and a lack of love for His word. You cannot love who you do not know, and who you love you want to know better. So, who do you love; the God of the Bible, or a god of your own imagination; Jesus as He is, or Jesus as you want Him to be? The church has had to deal with false Christs almost from its inception. They are as limitless as man's imagination to invent them. At the close of His Sermon on the Mount Jesus warned, *'Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven...Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord'...And I will declare to them, 'I never knew you...'* (Mt 7:21-23). Notice Jesus says ~~many~~, not some, but ~~many~~. Will you be among the many? How do you know if you do not know Him or His word? If you do not know His word and love His word, you cannot know Him. You can only know God through a personal knowledge of and intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, *'All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him'* (Mt 11:27; cf. Lk 10:22). And to whom does the Son will to reveal God as He is? The weary and heavy-laden (Mt 11:28); weary of sin, weary of trying to be good enough, weary with your own effort to earn salvation, weary with carving out your own leaky cisterns; and heavy-laden with guilt, with despair over your own inability, and with all the gods of your own imagination. Learn from Jesus; study Jesus; not the Jesus of someone else's self-serving imagination, not the commercialized Jesus, but Jesus as He really is, the Jesus of the Bible. If you love Him, you will want to know Him as He really is. My prayer is that you will.