

The UNION

Get Ready to Meet the King!

God Calls His Church to
Truth, Faith and Holiness

2017

Joan H. Richardson

The UNION

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by Joan H. Richardson

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Obedience

Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. (Is. 1:18)

Out of depravity, out of the darkness of sin and shame, where no one finds a friend, He first met us. There He loved us as we were. Now the Hand of God has formed our lives to make us one with Him since God in Christ loves us beyond reason.

What is obedience? It is our willingness to let God transform us into Christ's likeness; it's the deliberate decision of the heart to become His disciple. Obedience is the willing embrace of the Father's discipline, knowing as we turn all that wars against us into opportunities for spiritual change and growth, God will work everything together for our benefit. Then, what the devil intends for our destruction conforms us to Jesus by our faith in Him.

Obedience is progressive and focused. Its progression urges Christ's likeness in us; its focus aligns our hearts with His Word; its empowerment comes by His Spirit. Obedience is eternal life as we live by faith in Christ. It is the charge of every believer: holiness by sanctification. He set us free to devote our words and hearts to Him because He has given us a new nature. Those who refuse a life of sacrifice, sharing in His sufferings, will neither enjoy His likeness nor gain His resurrection.

Though the flesh might suffer through life's trials, His care for us who seek Him shields our souls from harm. With protective love, He embraces whom He foreknew before He established the earth. No trial can destroy us who believe and obey Him, because we experience His life each day in relationship with Him. All He is, is all we want, and that is all He wants of us. We are His bride, and He is our Lord, our Husband.

We endorse our love for Him with the signature of our obedience. As we seek His Kingdom and His righteousness, suddenly we discover Him in the fruitfulness of His Spirit. Here is the One we've been longing to know—living and growing within us—the Truth of the Word, our first love! He owns our hearts; therefore, we will live and we will die for His glory.

The God of Israel is God over all. He will return in His Son to render judgment and to defend His chosen people. At that time, He will receive those who are chosen into glory. Until then, our hearts look up, our minds are steadfast, and our faith endures to the end, knowing He will appear like lightning that pierces the skies; then at last, all eyes will see Messiah when He returns to reign.

Dedication

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THE UNION
is dedicated
to ISRAEL
FOR THE
PEACE of
JERUSALEM

Every kingdom
divided against itself
is brought to desolation
and every city or house
divided against itself
SHALL NOT STAND

Matthew 12:25

[YESHUA]

PRAY for

the PEACE of
JERUSALEM
they shall
prosper that
love thee

PEACE

be within
thy walls
prosperity
within thy

PALACES

for my brethren
and companions'
sakes, I will now say,

PEACE *be* within thee

Because of the HOUSE of the **LORD**
our **GOD** I will seek thy **GOOD**. PS. 122:6-9

Giving Thanks

to the true God
in our SAVIOR
the SACRIFICE
who paid
our debt,
our ONLY
FATHER
in Heaven
Source of Life
suffering long
He teaches me to
walk in His truth
as JESUS does
THANKS
for HIS
SPIRIT and
His WORD
apart from Him
I can do nothing
With gentleness
He helps me in
my weakness
and reveals
the Truth
to the least
of all. ALL
HONOR
GLORY
POWER
belong to
YESHUA
for the
UNION
of ALL who
BELIEVE

PART I

THE DECEIVER DIVIDES US

For, to begin with, I hear that when you come together as a church there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. There must, indeed, be factions among you, so that those who are approved may be recognized among you. (1 Corinthians 11:18-19 HCSB)

But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires." These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit. (Jude 17-19 NIV)

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "*He catches the wise in their own craftiness*"; and again, "*The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.*" Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: (1 Corinthians 3:18-21 NKJV)

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. (1 Corinthians 1:10 NASB)

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but *they went out* that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. (1 John 2:19-21 NKJV)

CHAPTER 1

Truth or Deception?

“Are we ... of the number of those who, having eyes, see not, and having ears, hear not, the things which so nearly concern their temporal salvation? For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it might cost, I am willing to know the whole truth; to know the worst, and to provide for it.” – Patrick Henry, speech at the Virginia Convention, 1775.

What Does the Word Say?

Only one source of information provides insight and wisdom about the one true God: the Holy Bible. Yet the same Word that saved us has been the controversy among us. How strange!

While living in sin, we turned to Jesus Christ, and faith in Him changed us, but along the way, unaware, we wandered from the truth into the diverse teachings of men. Whether oversimplified or far too complicated, their confused doctrines increased our divisions. The fault was theirs alone, but we received it.

If we repent of pride and seek the truth, then we can regain the union of our fathers, apostles and prophets whose words led the first churches and taught the truth in writings, gospels, and letters about our salvation.

How can we know the truth with certainty? We gain the mind of Jesus Christ by faith in His Spirit who authored the Scriptures. As we live in the Spirit, Messiah reveals His Spirit-filled language to us. With open hearts, we receive the Word. He speaks Spirit-to-Spirit, renewing our minds to understand His inspired pages. Just as He opened the Tenakh to His disciples on the road to Emmaus, He teaches us who walk with Him today.

His Spirit must reveal His words for us to understand them. If we refuse to change our beliefs, we'll remain in the darkness of our dogmatism; however, if we'll believe His Word, taking it into our hearts, He'll enlighten our minds and change our souls. We change and grow as we learn the ways of God. His truth will unite us in love as Jesus is loved by His Father, but we are only worthy of Him as we take up our cross and follow Him:

The Deceiver Divides Us

“And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.

(Matthew 10:38-39 NKJV) – Jesus

The revival we need demands our reformation. Our renewal requires a dramatic change in our personal character by faith in every word of God, leading us to repentance. Will we receive a revival that would transform how we’ve lived? or do we want a resurrection without dying and a revival without changing?!

To know the truth of God, we must erase the teachings of men from the slates of our minds. And why not? If what we’ve received is true, the Word will prove it; if not, we’ll seek the truth directly from the Word, and we’ll find it.

For to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the *thoughts* of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the *thoughts* of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*. (1 Corinthians 2:10-13 NASB)

By returning to the Holy Spirit as our Teacher, we’ll take in His inspired words, even passages we’ve shunned. We will dare to believe the words of God when orthodoxies oppose them, and His Spirit will teach us the deep things of God though we stand with Him alone.

Our First Love

What was our first love? the love of the Word! We believed in Jesus, He changed us, we rejoiced, and He shared our joy. We read scriptures for hours on end, cherishing the words we learned by heart. We wanted to be just like Him, but the teachers said, “That’s not possible in this lifetime.” We believed them and became like them, blinded to the truth of the Word. Since those days, we’ve felt safe in our crowd, but we’re not safe at all. (See Mat. 7:14)

Truth or Deception?

When we first believed in Jesus, His Spirit opened His words to us and changed us. Then we turned to men. Now after years of learning, do we still love the truth? Though we've learned so much, it seems that the elect have been deceived, that is, if it's possible for the deceived to be among the elect!

We might never admit it, but many professing believers have accepted the lie that the truth is relative, and we've applied that fleshly rationalization to excuse our differences. Think about it: if truth were relative, God could vacillate; but He is the Rock that isn't shaken, the Word of God in Christ. Unlike the steadfast truth, conjectures shift like sand as vain imaginations do; our opinions are our own enemies, endangering our lives.

We've chosen to trust in the way the world seeks its wisdom, and we've believed the ideas of men above the words of God. We've relied on mortals and have exalted them as iconic leaders. We have sinned. By turning from the way of our Savior, we have tripped into pitfalls. *And the Jews marveled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned? (Jn. 7:15)* Jesus learned, not from men, but from the Holy Spirit as His Word!

Have we been in relationship with the Holy Spirit, or do we hardly know Him? The Spirit and His Word urge us to discern good from evil, using caution; but deceptions have divided us who rejoiced together when we first believed the truth. How did this happen to us? We slipped into the patterns and ways of a culture, *Ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.* (2 Tim. 3:7)

Seeking Jesus

Jesus said He is the truth; that is to say, no lie is in Him. He does not divide His believers; without hypocrisy, the truth unites us. He is the Light; the Word of God exposes everything.

In the 1960's, the Holy Spirit was poured out on a generation that should be mature in Christ today, but we left our first love when we turned from the Word to men. Jesus-Yeshua will come again to receive Jews and gentiles who are one in the Word, one in the Spirit, one in the Father. The wise prepare with the faith of a child, learning at His feet—starting over again if needed, believing the truth, tearing down the strongholds, pulling down the doctrines that oppose the Word of God. (See 2 Cor. 10:3-5)

The Deceiver Divides Us

Jesus sent us out as sheep among wolves. Wolves live in packs; they're not loners but have lots of company. If we stand alone, we must agree with every word of God: *man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.* ((From Deut. 8:3; also Mat. 4:4; Lk. 4:4)

Can two walk together except they be agreed? (Amos 3:3)

When Jesus returns, *shall he find faith on the earth?* (See Lk. 18:8) His intention is to save everyone who lives by faith in His words. How can we stand before the Word of God unless we believe Him? How can He increase in us unless we decrease?

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called *me* through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood. (Galatians 1:15-16 NKJV) – the apostle Paul

Many of us have made the gifts of the Holy Spirit titles for ourselves, but God never gave us titles. He gave us places in the body, not titles. We haven't known who the Nicolaitans were, but we have sinned like they did. We should pay attention to the Word and live by our faith. We've lost humility, but if we'd be humble, He'd reveal His truth and restore us. If we prayerfully read and faithfully believe His words, His Spirit will enlighten us to understand the truth, and by His truth, He will unite us.

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15 NKJV)

Have we selflessly lived in humility, loving others? As His Spirit patiently works within us, let's seek to know Jesus, not for any other reason than to become like Him. Our hearts can't hide from Him whose wisdom tests our motives, but His words are life to us when we receive them. Let's not shun His admonitions, preferring ease above the discomfort of a splintered cross.

Knowing we could not learn the truth without Him, the Father sent the life of Christ to us, His Holy Spirit—our Teacher. He lives within us if His Word has taken root and been fruitful in

Truth or Deception?

our hearts. The Seed of the Spirit, the Word, gives birth to His own kind—thus, we were born of His Spirit, conceived by His Word in our hearts! Now two natures force our choice in every decision: will we follow the flesh or the Spirit?

When we received Jesus, we received the Word of God. The Seed of His life is in us; when we surrender to Him by faith and obedience, His words remain in us. *If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him and make our abode with him (See Jn. 14:23)*

As willing hearts receive the scriptures, we thrive and are fruitful; but His words don't take root in hardened, unbroken ground, or where rocks or thistles are, so we cast our cares on Him and clear out the thistles; we embrace our trials and break up the hardened ground to dig our wells; each time we repent, we unearth stones. As we keep His words, the Spirit makes us holy.

Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore makes himself a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"? But He gives more grace. Therefore He says:

*"God resists the proud,
But gives grace to the humble."* (James 4:4-6 NKJV)
[The name "James" is Jacob, or *Ya'akov*, in Hebrew.]

His Spirit is jealous for our souls' desires. By faith, we must tear down everything that stands between the Word and our soul; anything that competes for first place is an idol. If we want Jesus more than the visible world, we accept the loss of all these things; we know that whatever makes us proud will bring us shame.

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:15-17 NIV)

The Deceiver Divides Us

The Almighty is unimpressed by our opinions. He gives and takes away the intelligence of the intelligent but rewards the faith of the obedient. He commands us all to believe His words because He is the true God. Since faith honors Him, He searches the earth for faith in our hearts; then He enlightens our minds.

Yeshua first entrusted His words to twelve ordinary men. Except for Judas Iscariot, He made them all apostles. He chose some to write as His eyewitnesses to the churches. His Jewish disciples established the first congregations of Christians on the earth. They were average men, not extraordinary individuals, which is exactly why He chose them.

Though Paul had been a scholar, in order to believe the truth of the Scriptures, He rejected many of the things he had been taught. Separating himself from the counsel of men, he tore down what he thought he knew so he could correctly understand the Scriptures.

Jesus taught His followers by supernatural revelation. He made it clear that it doesn't take a genius to understand the prophets' books, but it takes the Holy Spirit, the Author who inspired them. He disciplines us and withholds knowledge from us until we prove ourselves faithful. Indeed, the mystery of faith is the key to the Scriptures: first we must believe the words; then His Spirit teaches our minds by revelation—just as when we first believed the gospel.

One Truth

Why do nearly all knowledgeable teachers disagree with one another? The answer is obvious: the deceiver is among us. How did this happen? It's been this way from the beginning; Jesus warned us it would occur. He saw it among His own people, even in the synagogues where devils had deceived the leaders.

One root of unbelief is pride; another is spiritual laziness. Some of us presume our intelligence will lead us to understand the Scriptures; others agree that only an elite few are bright enough to learn the Word. On the one hand, there's pride; on the other, laziness. We go to schools to learn the Word, but no one who relies on his intellect can understand the Holy Spirit, and the rest of us are fine with that. To understand its contents, we must be solely dependent on the Author of the Book whose truth is singular: its reality stands up against everything false.

Truth or Deception?

Since no lie is in Christ, we will be held to account for our unbelief that doubts His many references to the Tenakh—even to stories of Jonah and Noah, to the Law and the Prophets. Do we say we believe in Him when by our words and actions we deny Him? We must yield to Him in whom God appears as His Word.

“Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops.

(Matthew 10:27 NKJV) – Jesus

If we believe in God and fear His Word, when He convicts us of our sins, we prove our love for Him by repentance. Embracing the truth, we escape carnality and unbelief; confessing our sins, we receive the truth that frees us. Though every man is a liar, the words of God are always true. His truth shines its light, spoken or unspoken—His truth is constant.

God wants us to know Him by His Word; He isn’t trying to confuse us but is drawing us into His Spirit—into Himself; He wants to teach us His words. He attracts us by concealing the secret things we can only discover as we press in to receive the words that we can’t understand unless we believe them. It’s as simple as the faith of a child to open the gates of the kingdom.

Our Father would unveil His truth, cleanse our hearts, and renew our minds to change our lives if we would only believe His words. That’s grace! If we would cooperate and not shrink back, He would draw us out of our darkness, into His light: grace again! He freely gives us the will and the faith to believe—by grace! When we stumble, as all do, He lifts us up to walk again: grace! If we’re honest with ourselves, we find His grace toward us amazes us, and we glorify Him for His patience and love.

Often His words are difficult because we’ve been misled and indoctrinated by ideas that please our selfish desires. He would renew us to unite with His desires. By His loving mercies, God has given each believer the Holy Spirit as his Teacher. He would clarify the Word to us and transform our carnal nature into His spiritual nature. When we realize God speaks in spiritual words, we can see why the Holy Spirit is our Teacher. If He is our Shepherd, we are His sheep; are we listening to His voice or to men? But not all who profess faith have His Spirit, and only those *led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God.* (See Rom. 8:14)

The Deceiver Divides Us

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and *they* are life. (John 6:63 NKJV)

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, *which is* your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what *is* that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (Romans 12:1-2) Q: Will we give up our lives to Him?

For rarely will anyone die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man, someone might even dare to die. (Romans 5:7 TLV) –Yeshua is that good man.

We experienced the Holy Spirit soon after we received Jesus as Savior and Lord. Then we opened the Bible and discovered it read quite differently from before. Its words hadn’t changed but were there all along. When we believed, the Spirit opened our hearts to take in its words, and His inspiration changed our souls.

Though teachers have said no one can personally receive a revelation of the Word, that’s not what the next passage teaches. These verses tell us that prophecies never came by the opinions, ideas, or interpretations of men; but holy men wrote the words as the Holy Spirit inspired and moved them:

For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, a voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory:

This is My beloved Son.
I take delight in Him!

And we heard this voice when it came from heaven while we were with Him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic word strongly confirmed. You will do well to pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dismal place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all, you should know this: No prophecy of Scripture comes from one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the will of man; instead, men spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:17-21 HCSB)

Truth or Deception?

In our first letter by Paul to the Corinthian church, shocking things had been going on among them, yet they hadn't been judging the simplest matters. The Corinthian believers had been listening to persuasive opinions of men rather than instructive words of the Holy Spirit. Until the apostle explained spiritual maturity to them, they had been blind to their own carnality:

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.

And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, *even* as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able *to bear it*, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas *there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?* (1 Corinthians 2:14-3:3)

Paul said the spiritual man is judged by no man, because he has the mind of Christ; the carnal man does not have the spiritual mind of Christ, but his perceptions are like those of the natural man. The Corinthian church was carnal because they were divided and lacked spiritual understanding. They had not grown spiritually since their early days in Christ because, although some exercised the gifts of the Spirit, they had not yet produced the fruit of the Spirit; however, the fruit of the Holy Spirit is the experience of daily life for the spiritual man.

We hinder spiritual growth by believing erroneous doctrines; one such teaching is that we all have the mind of Christ. That lie is pleasant to a proud, carnal church, but if we don't anticipate the tendency of our mortal nature to lure us from the truth, we become the victims of our own proud deceptions.

When we distort what is holy for personal comfort; when we take pride in men; when we pervert the Word; when we prefer intellectual teachings about spiritual things—our sins confuse and blind us. We are divided because not all that we've believed is true. How much misinformation have we spread? If we have

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the Holy Spirit, how did the divorce from Truth occur? Have we been unaware of the devil's schemes? Will we allow the light to expose what we've hidden in the dark? Have we matured since our first days in Jesus or merely repeated the same tenets? Have we believed His Word and listened to His Spirit as at first or relied on others instead? We are confused with many diverse teachings by not listening to the one true Teacher. Have we been comfortable in our world but forgotten our Lord?

For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

But I want to remind you, though you once knew this, that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. (Jude 4-5 NKJV)

Jesus Christ calls us to be holy and blameless, without fault; yet we quarrel among ourselves over what we should understand. Some argue our conflicts are peripheral and unimportant. In other words, some Christians don't believe every word of God is significant. We're in unbelief, but faith in His truth is life to its believers.

Someone says, "If anyone thinks he has the truth, he's arrogant." To the contrary, God reveals His words to the humble. By disagreeing with His truth, men are arrogant. False teachers have convinced us our conflicting doctrines are unavoidable, and privately we think God understands when we believe ideas other than His. We have been duped if we believe false teachings are acceptable to God. The opinions of scholars and laymen alike are futile, trying to understand His words with merely mortal minds.

The true Messiah will return for the holy union of Jews and gentiles—His true bride—spotless and blameless, vigilant and faithful, prepared for the Groom. If we believe in Him, we agree with every word of His Spirit. Do we believe or challenge Him?

Then Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in Me, believes not in Me but in Him who sent Me. And he who sees Me sees Him who sent Me. I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not

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abide in darkness. And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak.” (John 12:44-50 NKJV) –Obedience is everlasting life.

His Spirit empowered Jesus to speak and obey His Father’s words. He told us that obedience to His Father is everlasting life. Not just true for Him, the Word is true for all who follow Him. As the Holy Spirit empowered the Son of man to live by His words, Jesus empowers us to do as He did by faith in His words.

Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works’ sake. Verily, verily I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father. And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it. (John 14:11-14)

Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. (John 17:1-5 NKJV)

The serpent challenged the integrity of God and defied His authority in Eden. He deceived the ones God had made in His image and does the same today. The question, “Does God really mean what He says?” prompts us to ask, “Why would God say

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something He doesn't mean?" The suggestion that Messiah did not mean what He said is identical to the deception of the serpent in the garden:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1 NIV)

"... Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We *are*. (John 17:11b NKJV)

Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14 NASB)

Though Adam trusted a liar but not his Creator, now the Lord is offering us a golden opportunity to believe in Him. Faith in the Son of God sets us apart from the world, sanctifying us for holy purposes; our fear of Him honors God. *Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. (1 Pet. 2:17)*

Many Interpretations

See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused him who spoke on earth, much more *shall we not escape* if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven. (Hebrews 12:25 NKJV) [Jews who rejected Moses' words did not escape the wrath of God; can the brethren in Christ escape who refuse His words?]

Jesus often spoke in parables, metaphors, and spiritual words to His disciples, urging them to diligently seek and fully know Him. The Holy Spirit divinely interprets His spiritual words for us to live in Him by receiving and following them.

Many words fill the Scriptures; not just a few are essential for life and godliness. Believing His words unites us; properly dividing the Scriptures, we will not be ashamed before God at the end of time. He commands each believer to depart from divisive spirits that interject deceit, spread confusion, hinder maturity, and undermine salvation. (See 2 Tim. 2:14-26)

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Our commitment to unity succeeds by a common faith in the truth as we love one another. We can't enter heaven if we refuse the truth that saves us who live by it—truth is our plumb line.

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

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the wind blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” (Matthew 7:21-25 NIV)

If we believe only some Scriptures but not others, we could very well end up with the hypocrites, crying out, “Lord, Lord! Open the door to heaven for us!” Apart from the light, no one can know God; the Light came from the Father into the world as the Word of God. As the true Light, He invades the darkness, penetrating every hiding place. And His life is in His Word.

We who claim a relationship with Jesus Christ must come out of death into life, out of the darkness into the light that exposes dark and secret thoughts. God who never lies requires us to believe His full counsel; by it, He imparts life to us. Apart from the truth, a little leaven puffs up the whole lump of dough. If the meaning of a passage eludes us, His Spirit lives in us to give us wisdom when we ask in faith and wait for understanding.

It's not for us to pick what we prefer. His words are not like food in a cafeteria where we take just what we want and reject the rest, but His words are the unleavened bread of life to us who receive them. His words deliver us out of the nature of sin, which is why faith in the truth is vital to everlasting life. Is holiness critical to our experience, or is sin permissible?

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If we say we love Him but refuse to obey God, we are self-deceived. It's impossible to shun His words and love the Lord. The good news is, if we repent, He changes us, giving us the faith that prompts us to obey by His Spirit's power. He might speak through another with wisdom for us to hear; but if walls go up, we can be sure somebody built them.

Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me. (John 14:23-24 NKJV)

Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit.

(Hebrews 6:1-3)

The Cunning Serpent

The decision to be ready for His coming is individually ours. The apostolic fathers wrote words that fill our hearts with fear, adamantly teaching purity, preferring the cross to the pleasures of this world. Have we known the same Savior, or is our Jesus quite casual about sin? Has our Jesus done it all without giving us the mandate to follow Him, or is there a cross to carry? Does Jesus want us to face disapproval as He did? Is this the abundant life? Yes, the life that is greater than its rejection is abundant! It's the life that empowers us to love our enemies and pray for them who hate us; the abundant life rises above its adversaries.

But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of *devotion* to Christ. For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear *this* beautifully.

(2 Corinthians 11:3-4 NASB)

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For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away *their* ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. (2 Timothy 4:3-4)

Looking to the future, the apostle did not see an enlightened, truth-loving, cross-carrying, Savior-following church. Instead, Paul exhorted Timothy to continue with perseverance in the truth, contending against erroneous doctrines. Light exposes all things; truth is light, exposing what's hidden in darkness. Is the truth in us? Are we hiding pride in our hearts? Are we afraid to look? but we must.

"The heart is deceitful above all *things*,
And desperately wicked;
Who can know it?
I, the LORD, search the heart,
/ test the mind,
Even to give every man according to his ways,
According to the fruit of his doings.
(Jeremiah 17:9-10 NKJV)

One Teacher

This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. (1 John 1:5-7)

If we walk in His light, we fellowship with Him and with our brothers and sisters in Christ. When we believe the words His Spirit inspired, we believe Jesus, the Word made flesh. By faith in Jesus, we believe His Father since He is the Word of God. (See Jn. 1:1, 14) They are One for the Father is in His Son as His Word, proceeding from His bosom: *Now the Lord is that Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.* (2 Cor. 3:17)

"I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not

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He will speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose *it* to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose *it* to you.” (John 16:12-15 NASB) –Jesus

However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. (Romans 8:9-11 NASB)

Jesus said, *I am the way, the truth, and the life.* (See Jn. 14:6) If anyone wants to know the Father, he must first know His Son. Denying any of the truth, we can't know Him. By formulating doctrines before we believe every word, we are bound to err with interpretations that won't pass the scrutiny of the Scriptures.

But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call *anyone* on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, *that is*, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. (Matthew 23:8-11 NASB) – Jesus

What we see in the selfless actions and words of Jesus Christ our Lord is the way to life everlasting. If we seek pleasures for ourselves, we will die. Our words and actions plant seeds either to the Spirit or to the flesh; only one narrow road leads to life, but false doctrines harden our hearts.

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matthew 16:24-26 NKJV)

CHAPTER 2

Descending Darkness

For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper *in the thing* whereto I sent it.

(Isaiah 55:10-11)

Certainly some scholars are humble servants, seeking His truth, but it seems that often intellectuals rely on their own minds rather than on His Spirit for their answers. Many have never received the Holy Spirit. Some wrestle with the Word; dismayed by their confusion, they concede defeat, and with bruised pride, challenge the integrity of the Scriptures.

Those who depend on their intelligence espouse theories that spread like viruses. Some of them established doctrines about critical issues, seducing entire denominations to their detriment. Too many have had a biblical education that included the interpretations of scholars; considering the opinions of pundits, we thought we could figure things out, but none of us could even begin to understand apart from the mind of God. He corrected me to show me the better way: let His Spirit be the Teacher.

Misguided intellectuals are not the only ones at fault. Nearly all of us have been tricked by the deceiver; it just takes a wandering thought or a personal idea to receive a lie. The misfortune of scholars is that they are widely believed. Knowing this, as submissive servants, we must all pay attention to His inspired words and search the counsel of the Holy Spirit to correctly divide the Scriptures; then we can discover the truth by destroying the lies one at a time—the way we received them.

Reading the Word afresh, we believe it as it is written and take down the strongholds in our own minds that prevent us from believing its Author. If we'll search for the truth by comparing scriptures, His Spirit will clarify it to us. Paul wrote, *The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of*

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God. (Rom. 8:16) If we know we have the Holy Spirit, we can press in to seek His knowledge: as we read and meditate on each passage, we pray and wait to receive understanding. If it doesn't come immediately, that's fine—it will come in time.

Men have taught us what we think we know; however, as we meditate on His words, His Spirit renews our minds. As we take in His words, then His revelations, not our own, expand our thoughts, opening our minds as His knowledge increases in us. When He unseals His words, we learn His ways like never before—with deeper, fuller perceptions of the greatness of God.

The Author, the Holy Spirit, is the light and life of His Word: born in a stable, Jesus was meek, submissive to God. The Spirit chose shepherds and fishermen like Abram, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David; Peter, James, Mark, Andrew, and John—the most unlikely and least of all. God listens to the languages of hearts that receive or reject His words. The Master of speech isn't shaken by our weaknesses but glorifies His omnipotence in our impotence.

Sources of Deceptions

We must be still to listen because the noise of daily activity can obscure His quiet words. Busy thoughts mute His voice since the carnal mind is absorbed in this world rather than in the kingdom to come. As we train our *hearts* to *hear* His voice, we become more aware of His presence. Believing His words, in quietness and submission, we will yield to His will.

We have been ignorant by inattentiveness; dulled by insensitivity, and burdened by daily cares. Most of us left our first love long ago. If we want to know Him, we'll seek Him, pushing all else aside just to read and believe His holy Word. Things quiet down when we cast our cares on Jesus.

If we strain to hear His voice, we will not hear the Lord. If we practice quietness, we'll become better listeners by habit; then, when He speaks, we'll know it's Him, true to His Word.

Teachers often distort the truth to provide quick and pleasant answers, their own inventions that attract our carnal nature. With convincing self-confidence, they soothe itching ears, and we easily accept the appealing information without testing it by the Word, which has forewarned us: the devil weaves his serpentine paths through the Word, convincing the intellects of men.

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Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

(Matthew 7:15-20) – Yeshua [The man who speaks the truth is a godly teacher; the proud man is carnal and untrustworthy.]

Christ commands us to carry a cross daily, without which we would be unworthy of Him. He calls us to live sacrificially, loving others as ourselves. If we love the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we must love Him more than our own families for the sake of His kingdom and righteousness. He gave up everything for us to know Him. If our families deny Him, we follow Him anyway.

We should ask ourselves, “Do I believe what I hear because it pleases me, or do I seek the truth even when it’s difficult to receive? Do I follow Jesus Christ or someone else?” Have we honored leaders but not the Word? Have we been following the sheep all these years just because we are members of a flock? The Holy Spirit and His Word are our defense on the battlefields of life; we keep the ground we gain by faith in Christ alone.

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written,

“No eye has seen,
no ear has heard,
no mind has conceived what God has prepared
for those who love him”
but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

(1 Corinthians 2:6-10 NIV)

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“You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you:

‘THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS,
BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.
‘BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME,
TEACHING AS DOCTRINES
THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.’” (Matthew 15:7-9 NASB)

I am the good shepherd, and know my *sheep*, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep.
(John 10:14-15)

The church has been imitating the culture, and the world has turned us upside-down, though God called us to be different—the salt of the earth and the light of the world. But we’ve been far too sophisticated to be separated for sanctification. Now in the last days, the church has been artificial, lifeless, and ineffective; but now is the time to stand strong in righteousness. Many of us have been substituting outward appearance [leaven] for inward spirituality [truth] and have left our first love; we must return.

No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier. (2 Timothy 2:4 NASB)

In America, we award ourselves prizes, but God did not give us glorious gifts for tarnishing awards. Do we impress our peers or please our Creator? Did we give our hearts to Christ to gain recognition from others? We are impressed by degrees from “schools of thought” that spread inaccurate, biased ideas. Unlike Christ, we enjoy titles or letters after a name; the apostles had nothing, yet opened mysteries, turning their world upside-down!

But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, *yea*, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in His presence. (1 Corinthians 1:27-29)

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If we live according to our natural tendencies, we will die; if we live by the wisdom and ways of this world, we will die for the love of its wisdom and ways. But if His resurrection delivers us from sin, we will win over the flesh by our faith in His life.

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:4-5 NIV)

There are wolves among the sheep:

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. (Matthew 7:15)

And wolves in the world around us:

Then He said to them, "The harvest truly *is* great, but the laborers *are* few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs among wolves.

(Luke 10:2-3 NKJV) —Yeshua

Then there is the roaring lion:

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world. (1 Peter 5:8-9)

Some preach that Satan, *the roaring lion ... seeking whom he may devour*, is weak or toothless. Maybe that lie makes men feel strong, but the wolves and the lion have teeth, and the apostles knew what that meant when they forewarned us. For survival, sheep must avoid hungry lions—deceptive spirits, working by the words of men who add speculation to knowledge; however, we must take every thought captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ.

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Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

(James 3:13-18 NASB)

The desire for power or wealth is lust that leads to envy, covetousness, or pride—emotions of the carnal mind, drawing us to earthly things; our possessions possess us when we oppose the Word:

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. (2 Peter 2:1-3 NIV)

Envy is resentful or discontented longing for possessions or qualities of others; its idolatry includes class envy. It leads to covetousness, i.e. the desire to possess what someone else has. These sins can turn into thievery—even to adultery and murder:

If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. (Continued)

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But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. (1 Timothy 6:3-7 NIV)

If we serve God, we are content with what we have and with where we are; however, competitive spirits stir greed and envy among us, and selfish ambition is rebellion that attempts to advance above others. If His Holy Spirit rules in our hearts, we are subjects of His affections rather than objects of our own.

But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and *there must be no* filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. 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 Christ and God.

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. (Ephesians 5:2-6 NASB)

The proud man claims a place above others, seeking his own glory, boasting in his accomplishments, possessions, or abilities. Pride is self-worship, another form of idolatry. His outward appearance of godliness might mask a man's pride, but God sees his heart. Only his confession and repentance can free him from pride, which never wants to be found out. It is a most deceptive sin—one that conceals itself under its own cloak.

And his mercy *is* on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath shown strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from *their* seats, and exalted them of low degree. (Luke 1:50-52)

The Word warns us not to speak maliciously against supernatural beings. Have we slandered others? even the prophets? Have we viciously accused spiritual beings? or men in authority over us? the government? our employers? what about the devil? Do we believe the Scriptures? The righteous obey the words of God. If we fall, we repent and rise by faith again.

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Likewise also these dreamers defile the flesh, reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries. Yet Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!" But these speak evil of whatever they do not know; and whatever they know naturally, like brute beasts, in these things they corrupt themselves. (Jude 8-10 NKJV)

Bold and arrogant, these men are not afraid to slander celestial beings; yet even angels, although they are stronger and more powerful, do not bring slanderous accusations against such beings in the presence of the Lord. But these men blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like brute beasts, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like beasts they too will perish. (2 Peter 2:10b-12 NIV)

Self-willed and carnally-minded, we attempt our unapproved plans. When the Lord sends angels to block our way, like the prophet Balaam, we rage against the obstacles we don't understand. Will we ever see our poverty, immaturity, and carnality? or will we glibly grab verses we think will cover our nakedness?

Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity." (2 Timothy 2:19 NKJV)

We have the glory of God within clay jars, our bodies. He formed us, like burning lamps, to reveal His kingdom to men; in this way, together we are a shining city on a hill. Yet if we would grasp our destiny, we must believe the truth, written in His Word. When we act by faith in it, we keep it until the truth is ingrained us. Those who live by such faith are united in the truth by the power of love: *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ... He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* (Col. 1:15, 17 NIV) *If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.* (1 Cor. 13:2 NIV)

Descending Darkness

The First Institutional Church²

Beginning in the early fourth century, church bishops created an institution. At first there were hundreds of *papas*, or popes. In the late fifth century, the pope of Rome usurped most of their authority, considering himself as an emperor over the churches.

The commandments had been officially abused and broken in the councils of the fourth century, an ongoing, uncorrected pattern. By the sixteenth century, Martin Luther nailed *95 Theses* to the door of the Roman Church in Wittenberg to oppose the sale of indulgences, or favors. However, Luther retained many other false church doctrines and attitudes.

Now nearly every religious institution has divisions and subdivisions, which embrace varieties of untrustworthy doctrines and teachings. Only the Bible is reliable; the most slandered and most misunderstood book in the world—the Holy Bible—is true.

Though it exists in the world, the kingdom of God is not of the world. Apart from religious kingdoms of men, God designed His kingdom, composed of perfectly arranged gemstones, living by faith. Walking in His righteousness and living by His words, we who are being changed by His Spirit are growing to conform to Jesus' likeness. If we will follow Him to the cross, we will also rise from death to life by His Spirit.

Jesus makes us holy as we seek His righteousness and depend fully on the power of His life within us to raise us into life in Him. And what is holiness but to love and forgive one another while keeping ourselves unspotted by the world?

The First Nicaean Council

Rather than seeking great positions in the church, Jude urged us to be holy, blameless, loving, and merciful so we can enter heaven with great joy. He reminded believers that mockers are those who practice ungodly lusts:

These are sensual persons, who cause divisions, not having the Spirit. But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in His Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save

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with fear, pulling *them* out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh. (Jude 19-23 NKJV)

Yeshua we can't see the kingdom of God: it's not an institution, organization, denomination, or building designed and built by men, but His glory shines through the hearts of those who love and obey Him: *The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo here! or Lo there! for behold, the kingdom of God is within you.* (Lk. 17:20-21)

In AD 324-5, the Roman Emperor Constantine organized the first of many councils of bishops, the Council of Nicaea.³ Impressed by his grand entrances, the leaders were pleased when the emperor joined the meetings. His own purpose in planning the meetings was unity between the church and a divided Roman Empire. In an effort to unite everyone, the bishops compromised the Bible, agreeing to incorporate pagan holidays as Christian days by removing the prophetic feasts from the congregations of believers who shared them. [While it's true, we must not depend on special days for our salvation or holiness, it's not a sin to share in feasts with other believers; neither is it compulsory.]

For example, a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor man dressed in dirty clothes also comes in. If you look with favor on the man wearing the fine clothes and say, "Sit here in a good place," and yet you say to the poor man, "Stand over there," or, "Sit here on the floor by my footstool," haven't you discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ...

Indeed, if you really carry out the royal law prescribed in Scripture, **Love your neighbor as yourself**, you are doing well. But if you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking it all. (James 2:2-4, 8-10 HCSB) [If we do not live in love, we break the Ten that judge our sin.]

James wrote we must not show favoritism to the rich, but by pandering to the emperor, the councils mixed the heathen culture with the kingdom of God: paganism with Christianity. He might have humbled himself in their meetings, but the bishops insisted he take a higher seat and a prominent role in the council. After

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that, Constantine led the Council of Nicaea though he had pagan sympathies and was philosophically divided. History shows he was a carnal man—still, the bishops welcomed his opinions. Agreeing with the emperor was politically expedient.

The leaders faced a problem: to reconcile their faith with the pagans of Rome, they would need to make changes that some of them had not anticipated when they'd begun. Their decisions framed "orthodox theology," i.e. *right opinion*. From its inception, the new religion included anti-Semitism, discarding the Feast of Firstfruits and installing the Day of Ishtar, goddess of fertility. Eventually, the Roman day that was consecrated to the god of the sun, their chief god, became the day of the church; this seemed rational since Christ rose on the first day, but Jesus said the Commandments will not pass away till all is fulfilled, i.e. at the end, when the Kingdom is given to the Father. He is the only One who kept the whole law. Fulfilling many of the prophecies, He honored the Hebrew Scriptures, but in ignorance, the councils disdained them. Aside from the broken Mosaic covenant, these were the basic tenets of the apostle's writings.

In heated debates, the bishops created new laws, dictates, for the church, which conflicted with the writings of the apostles. In order to unify the world empire, the hierarchy of the institution forced their new religion on multitudes. Does this sound familiar in an age when men seek unity at the cost of truth?

The changes worsened with time; the Commandments were tossed to the wind! The leaders became more corrupt, ruined by the leaven of their rationalizations. Eventually, idols were taken into the church, which severed the union of Jewish and gentile congregations, distancing gentile and Jewish believers from the institutional churches. Soon true believers became the persecuted targets of the apostate church.

In their efforts to defeat false teachings, most of the bishops were deceived when they set aside the Law and the Prophets from which Messiah taught His disciples after His resurrection and which had been the thread in the fabric of the apostolic writings. By neglecting the whole Word of God, the leaders neglected its Author's intentions. Their gentile roots must have influenced the councils' decisions when they offended believers but pleased pagan Rome. And that is our history!

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While maintaining a sham of obedience to the moral laws of God, the bishops, calling themselves fathers, or “papas,” began altering the Scriptures as early as AD 325. As self-importance grew, a very different church emerged until new laws and new biblical interpretations misrepresented the faith of the apostles. In time, the now mainly gentile leaders made more decisions and changed the biblical words they couldn’t understand, fabricating strategies to keep the institution strong. In short, the church lost its identity as a fellowship of believers. [Since the Greek had no punctuation, I have omitted it here:]

And Jesus answered and said unto them take heed that no man deceive you for many shall come in my name saying I am Christ and shall deceive many.
(Matthew 24:4-5)

Bishops grew more corrupt with more power. By the fifth century, a few claimed authority over all of the churches of the known world. At first, a Roman pope demanded that his peers subjugate themselves to him, naming himself head of the church of the entire Roman Empire, which became highly organized, ritualistic, and liturgical—impersonal and aloof from God.

Unlike the simpler, organic congregations, which Paul had described as members of one body, humbly ministering to one another in love; the church became a sophisticated organization with outrageous claims, along with its own laws and by-laws. The great apostasy continued. What does this mean to us today?

Many doctrines came from a church that received the spirit of Babylon; in its imperialism, it would claim equality with God. Egypt’s Pharaoh did it; Assyria’s Sennacherib claimed it; in Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar wanted worship; in Greece, Antiochus insisted on it; in Rome, the Caesars claimed it; then the popes of Rome joined the long line of ungodly rulers that has existed since Babel—in the culture that worshiped a king!

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead *men’s* bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. (Matthew 23:27-28)

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Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.
(Luke 22:25-27 NIV)

Differences and Divisions³

Eventually the most earnest seekers recognized the inconsistencies of Rome's dogma. With marginal success, they broke away to form their own belief systems. Thus the denominations are children of a great harlot, a false church begun by scholars who devised doctrines, in large part, from a pagan worldview.

Today the estimated total number of divisions in Christendom is in the thousands, but even ten misinterpretations of the Word should send a chilling message to each of us concerning the validity of what we have been told it teaches. To learn the truth, each of us must hunger and thirst for it. We've presumed we know it, but our presumption is arrogance, and the Word we say we hold so dearly is still the truth that's ours to receive.

Divide and conquer is a strategy of war. Surely an enemy has attempted to lure, scatter, and destroy the flock. Would the devil urge Christians to live holy lives? But the Bible does. Would he tell us we could understand the Scriptures by first believing them? Of course not. Will an enemy correct our path when we wander off? but the serpent has duped and divided us!

Our war is against the unseen: our mortal nature and the devil. The first is dull, engaged in this world and enticed by its pleasures; the second is cunning, opposed to mankind and intent on our destruction. We are lambs among wolves, yet we rarely consider our need for protection.

Both our nature and the devil are defeated enemies when we are filled with the Word and do battle with the sword of truth and the shield of faith. But Christians are often oblivious to these enemies and are easy targets with our swords sheathed and our shields down.

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Then a demon-possessed man *who was blind and mute* was brought to Jesus, and He healed him, so that the mute man spoke and saw. All the crowds were amazed, and were saying, “This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?” But when the Pharisees heard *this*, they said, “This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.”

And knowing their thoughts Jesus said to them, “Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?” (Matthew 12:22-26 NASB)

God is not divided, and we who believe must abide in Him as one. What becomes of those who believed the truth at first but became proselytes of deceptions after entering the fold? *And how can they hear without a preacher?* (See Rom. 10:14)

Rabbis who studied the writings of the prophets couldn't identify the Messiah when He fulfilled the prophecies before their eyes. Like the church, they didn't believe the hard words of the Scriptures, which were unpleasant to them, and their traditional teachings blinded them. The Savior died for their sins, but they hadn't accepted those words among the prophecies; thus they rejected the prophesied Son of God—His Servant and their Savior. The deceiver was moving stealthily among them even as the Word of God was being fulfilled:

See, my servant will act wisely;
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
Just as there were many who were appalled at him—
his appearance was so disfigured
beyond that of any man
and his form marred beyond human likeness—
so he will sprinkle many nations,
and kings will shut their mouths because of him.
For what they were not told, they will see,
and what they have not heard, they will understand.
(Isaiah 52:13-15 NIV)

In Miletus Paul met with the elders of the early church of Ephesus and warned them of the events at hand:

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I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. (Acts 20:29-31 NASB) – Paul’s farewell

A Light in the Dark

“And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. (John 12:47-49 NKJV) – Yeshua

“Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30 NKJV)

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it *the* righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “BUT THE RIGHTEOUS *man* SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.” (Romans 1:16-17 NASB; also Habakkuk 2:4)

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off

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your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:17-24 NIV) [The truth warns believers of sin and exhorts us to be holy.]

Refined by Fire

When His Holy Spirit reveals a mystery, first He unseals it, then unwraps it, and finally, He opens it completely. It's a gift! Sometimes receiving its entirety takes years because we are slow to hear Him. If we are willing to wait on the Lord, over time everything meshes harmoniously and unequivocally. Those who find the truth have no place for doubt. When the Word first supplants the ideas we've believed, the discovery seems surreal, and we readjust our thoughts—renewing our minds. Then our renewed minds look into His words, and He clarifies our vision.

Faith is strengthened by use; do we believe God *before* we understand Him? We found Him by faith when we recognized our need. Then His Spirit responded to our faith, and the Word suddenly became our first love. Without faith, we'd be like Adam or Eve, fallen in Eden. But deceit will continue to plague the elect until our faith in the truth immunizes us from falsehood.

Faith precedes revelation. God will not disclose the truth to us unless we first *receive* His words; as we take them into our hearts by faith, we *assimilate* them until they become part of us. We should be passionate to believe in His Spirit who is the Lord and Author of our faith. His breath gives His Word life; when we speak it in faith, we deliver it most effectively.

Within our trials, the fires refine us until we are the mighty Sons of God. *Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.* (Jn. 8:31-32) First we believe, and then we can see.

John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire:
(Luke 3:16)

CHAPTER 3

Organized Confusion

When someone thinks of himself more highly than he sees others, he misses the message of the Savior's love. Unlike those who take pride in high positions, His Spirit has no such motive. We can trust in Him completely because God is like His Word: He's real. He doesn't weave a web to catch and consume us.

Jesus was unimpressive to the leaders, yet He was the Son of God. He glorified His Father, and God would glorify Him. He was concerned with pleasing the Father, not others. When they were seeking to kill Him, He showed up among them, doing His Father's will, but they were powerless to harm Him because His time hadn't come.

As each of us surrenders his heart to the Father as Jesus did, he follows in His steps. As we trust Him, we obey and love Him; if we love Him, we seek Him; if we seek Him with our whole heart, He will reveal His words to us by the Holy Spirit of Christ in us.

You younger men, likewise, be subject to *your* elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.

Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you. Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in *your* faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen *and* establish you. To Him *be* dominion forever and ever. Amen.

(1 Peter 5:5-11 NASB)

Sheep⁴ will lead one another off a precipice and plunge to their deaths, and surprisingly, the entire flock will follow; there-

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fore sheep need a Shepherd. The Lord is our Shepherd. Jesus said He is the one true Shepherd who knows His sheep, and we hear His voice, not the voice of a stranger. If we are His sheep, we listen for His voice in our hearts, and we follow Him.

Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep. All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them. ... The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. (John 10:7-8, 10-11)

The Witness

Even today true believers learn to identify the voice of the Shepherd whose Spirit rules in our hearts. When other voices confuse our minds by distorting the clarity of His words, this is our victory: we are not alone; His presence remains in us. As we settle into His Word, finding our rest in Him, we regain peace and truth. Our Counselor is the Holy Spirit of God—we are subject to Him and not the other way around. All who belong to the Father listen to the Word of the Father:

But when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you. (John 16:7, NIV) – Jesus, the day before the cross

Jesus rebuked self-righteous leaders who rejected the truth; to this day, He is the same: He rejoices in us when we love the truth and take the cross, face the grave, and rise to life again. Our Savior passionately desires us to be united in the knowledge of the truth as one in Him. He will return for a blameless, purified bride, not one mottled by quarrels and deceptions. Fiery trials will refine us, not by fearing men, but by His fear. We must trust Him to bring us through as we endure to the end.

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I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people.

(Romans 16:17-18 NIV)

The elder unto the well-beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth. ... For I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth. (3 John 1, 3-4)

The truth is alive because Jesus lives, and He wants us to know Him well. We grow as we learn the words that His Spirit inspired, humbling ourselves by relinquishing our opinions that pollute the purity of the Scriptures. When we set aside pride, doubt, fear, and self-will, we can objectively believe the Bible. It's time to give ourselves up, leaving our egos at the cross.

Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform *it* until the day of Jesus Christ: (Philippians 1:6)

Christ came to give each of us a new life, and this life comes by faith in His words. If we agree with teachings that lead to death, we will surely wither and die, but if we separate ourselves from the teachings of men, committing ourselves to believing the Bible only, we will thrive. Truth is not optional—Jesus Christ embodies the truth.

Writings of the Apostles

The New Testament is all we have of the original apostles' knowledge and doctrine. The church in Rome had been taught the truth by Paul who warned them against teachings that digress from the doctrines of the apostles. Although they strove for the union of believers, false teachers and false apostles divided their congregations with lies. After the apostles passed on to be with Christ, as they had written, wolves scattered the sheep, and liars spread deceit, perverting the former sound doctrines.

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Because of the present darkness, we who profess to believe must arm ourselves with the truth to understand the things the apostles and the prophets wrote. With clear consciences and honest hearts, we can abandon the disharmonious doctrines of men. As we meditate on the difficult passages, His Spirit will reveal them to us; this could take time, and patience is necessary.

Did we think walking in the light would not be a battle against the dark spirits of this world? No matter what the issue, at the cost of comfort, we take up our personal cross, dying to the flesh, keeping the faith because we know the truth. Soon we will be where there is no death or tears or pain.

“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty *again*? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. (Matthew 5:13 NASB)

We might reason all is well though we wander from one teacher to another, turning from the Word to fallacies that please our personal desires. Do we really love the truth? Then we must not believe whatever we choose to believe. *It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. (Lam. 3:22-23)*

Most of us have little knowledge of the Scriptures; misquote them, rearrange their contexts, and malign the few who understand the truth. The Scriptures are the true realities of life in the kingdom of God. Since His words are spiritual, neglecting the Holy Spirit is no way to receive their truth. When we apply the Word by the Spirit's power, its effects are evidenced on earth as in heaven.

Love Suffers Long

Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain. (Philippians 2:14-16 NKJV)

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In the earliest churches, the congregations chose trustworthy and faithful men, appointing them as servants. As time passed, some saw themselves as leaders and took titles, and eventually the leaders behaved like rulers. But Christ is our only Leader; our only Teacher, Counselor, Shepherd, and Savior.

Even in the first churches, Paul observed false apostles who spoke boastfully without the authority or power they claimed the right to possess. He wept, agonizing over the future of the church and dreading the repercussions of their deceit. Paul was wise to weep; since the early days, deceivers have been among us.

It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience.

... There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience. (Hebrews 4:6, 9-11 NIV)

Paraphrases are dangerous to our faith because versions are rewritten by private interpretations, which alter the accuracy of the Word. Though their writers often skew the truth, many rely on paraphrases as we should the correct translations. How would the Bible read today if its copiers had paraphrased it? Its critics would have good reasons for calling it unreliable. It's a fearful thing to tamper with the words of the Holy Bible! Does the One who made our eyes not see?

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17 NIV)

And He said to the man who had the withered hand, "Step forward." Then He said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they kept silent. And when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And

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he stretched it out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other. Then the Pharisees went out, and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him. (Mark 3:3-6; cf. Luke 6:6-11 NKJV)

Believers must adhere to the words of the early apostles, the eyewitnesses whose writings were carefully copied and delivered to us. We each live as we believe; therefore, if we think we've believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, we should search reliable versions of the Bible and compare them; we must intend to grow with integrity as we study His Word for the truth.

Jesus came, drawing us into His Holy Spirit to open His Word and reveal the Father to us. If our foundations are based on men's teachings, our faith is misguided. His Spirit will teach us His Word; no one else knows the mind of God except His Spirit. Is He a Witness within us?

Heresies

The Roman *papa* proclaimed himself ruler over all churches and called those who opposed his deceit, "heretics." In later years, the infamous leaders of the worldwide nominal church ordered Inquisitions and massacred many Jews along with true believers of the gospel of Jesus who loved the truth more dearly than their own lives. But the confession of Christ by Rome presented doctrines different from the biblical perspective with an ever-dying Jesus—dogma that lacked the power of faith in the presence of the living Christ.

The remnant of Jewish and gentile Messianic believers was falsely accused of heresy, persecuted, tortured, and put to death by the Roman Catholic Church. Should we ignore the facts? Its history made the Roman Church the leader of false teachings.

Contrary to such behavior, Jesus *never* taught us to destroy those who hold to other doctrines; they are reserved for the judgment. He *never* told us to harm our opponents; at a time when Jesus came to save sinners, the destroyer continued to destroy, just as he does today. But Christ sent His disciples, not to wage carnal warfare against flesh and blood but to save souls from death and hell. The cross is the symbol of our calling.

Anyone who has been transformed by faith in Jesus can discover the truth in the Bible, but many of us have already been

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influenced by our peers who press us to maintain the status quo, i.e. to hold onto what we have believed along with them. As a result, we have veered from the authority of His Holy Spirit to the private interpretations of men who are unwilling to change.

A true revival requires sacrifice and reformation. But will we prefer to weave our way through the Scriptures, targeting the ideas others have persuaded us to believe when God requires us to believe only Him?

The Definitions

Believe: In the present tense, biblically, the word means to be prompted to action by an ever-present faith. To believe on the Lord Jesus is unlike only having once believed; it is not that we *believed*, but that we *do believe* as we *live by faith*.

Heresy: A belief or opinion contrary to *orthodox doctrine*, defined as “the correct opinion,” i.e. a philosophical opinion, decided by a majority in either religion or politics.

Orthodox: The word “orthodox” originated in 17th century Middle English and comes from the Greek word, *orthodoxos*, via the Latin *orthos*, meaning “right or straight,” and *doxa*, “opinion.” It's understood to mean traditionally accepted teachings or sound doctrine; literally, it is *opinion* and is not necessarily right at all, since truth is not a matter of *opinion*, even the opinion of the majority. By chance, an opinion might hit the mark, but since truth is inerrant, why muddle it with opinions?

Orthodoxy, by its definition, is nothing more than “political correctness,” or Fascism. When theories enter science, it is no longer an accurate study; when opinions enter faith, it is no longer trustworthy; yet all churches profess orthodox doctrines, developed from opinions that distinguish and divide them from the truth of the Holy Scriptures.

In the sixteenth century, John Foxe wrote a book of collected stories about the deaths of English Protestants found guilty of heresy by the Roman Catholic Church [RCC]. Margaret Polley was the first Christian woman martyred in England. Maurice, Bishop of Rochester, brought an accusation of heresy against her. The following is an excerpt of her testimony:

[The Bishop Maurice] “Do you hold and maintain that in the sacrament of the altar, under the form of bread and wine, there is

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not the very body and blood of Christ, and that the said body is verily in heaven only, and not in the sacrament?”

She answered, “What I have learned from the Holy Scriptures I steadfastly maintain, viz., that the very body was crucified for the sins of all true believers, ascended into heaven, is there at the right hand of the Majesty on high; that such body has ever since remained there, and cannot, according to my belief, be in the sacrament of the altar. I believe that the bread and wine in the sacrament are to be received as symbols and representatives of the body and blood of Christ, but not of His body really and substantially. I think, in my weak judgment, that it is not in the power of any man, by pronouncing words over the elements of bread and wine, to change them into the real body and blood of Christ. In short it is my belief that the eucharist is only a commemoration of the death of our Savior, who said, ‘as oft as ye do this, do it in remembrance of Me.’ ” ... He then asked her, “Will you recant the error which you maintain, be reconciled to the Church, and receive the remission of sins?” To which she replied, “I cannot believe otherwise than I have spoken, because the practice of the Church of Rome is contrary not only to reason and my senses, but also to the Word of God.”⁵

Queen Mary I, in an attempt to reconnect the church of England to Rome, put to death hundreds of Protestants who refused to convert. In July 1555, Margaret Polley was convicted of heresy and sentenced to death. The false church burned her at the stake in Tonbridge. Through His Holy Spirit, she'd found the truth in the Word of God for which she died willingly. [Granted, no secretary sat beside her, writing her words as she spoke, but the people of those times understood the gist of the exchange.]

Under the reign of “Bloody Mary,” Thomas Cranmer and John Rogers died at the stake for “the crime” of publishing the Bible in English. In all, nearly four hundred men, women, and children died martyrs’ deaths for opposing Roman Catholic doctrines during her reign. The queen had turned from the Roman faith under her father, King Henry VIII, who divorced her mother. She later sought reconciliation with the Vatican by condemning its dissidents.

The remnant of true believers became many of the so-called “heretics” of the Dark Ages, but their light shined as a witness to the truth. They endured unspeakable torture while the church

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sanctioned their sufferings and executions, beheading many. Others were burned alive or slain by the sword.

The perpetrators were self-deceived, deluded to imagine that they represented the Lord Jesus but by their deeds, they were His mortal enemies—the antitheses of godliness. The men who destroyed human lives thought they had done God a service by killing their opponents, but the antichrist spirit then and now is one and the same. Of martyred saints, John Foxe wrote: “They were baptized in blood, because their enlightenment forced them to be in advance of their day.”

On their way to Jerusalem, which despised Samaria, Yeshua spoke to the disciples as they passed by a Samaritan village that had refused to welcome them:

And when His disciples James and John saw *this*, they said, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?”

But He turned and rebuked them, and said, “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save *them*.” And they went to another village.

(Luke 9:54-56 NKJV) [Samaritans were Jews whose ancestors had intermarried with Assyrians after the invasion.]

Today the truth of the Word is considered heresy by many, while heresies are accepted as *orthodox*. How do we identify heresies? Whatever does not agree with both the Spirit and the Scriptures is heresy. *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.* (2 Tim. 2:15)

The Spirit is life; the Word is Light; together they shine to overcome death and darkness, but if we ignore either one, we necessarily turn from the path of life. The Word overcomes the darkness in all who confess their need and search for its light. Its truth is the vitality of the Spirit, quickening our mortality.

Satan is a liar, but he is not stupid; he knows a divided kingdom can’t stand. He waits for any opportunity: pride, envy, selfish ambition, greed, itching ears, carnal minds, worldly desires, imaginations, and deceptive hearts, finding it relatively easy to introduce his heresies. *If I say, Surely the darkness shall*

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cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee. (Ps. 139:11-12)

As though the darkness is not here, we're sure we know all we need to know, but we've overlooked the false doctrines that divide us. We should believe the truth as one while opposing the forces that unite against biblical truth; but we've adjusted to our confusion. If we remain in institutional churches, we won't discard the lies to find the truth by the mind of Christ; remember, we don't war against flesh and blood.

Deceit did not announce itself when it entered the church; like noxious gas, it seeped in. It did the same in us who follow teachings that contradict the Scriptures—a little here, a little there—till lies pervade the atmosphere to destroy us. We've been unaware that deceptions have targeted our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls; while Satan binds us with sins and encumbers us with confusion, sickness, and disease.

When we receive the true faith of the apostles, it changes us to strengthen us as new creatures and to join us together as the rising bride of Christ. We can be the salt and light of the world, and the whole earth can know God sent His Son to take away our sins. Light shines most brightly in the dark; therefore, this could be our greatest hour!

Unspiritual Tailors

False teachers have stirred the passions of men for centuries, appealing to the base nature and convincing the unspiritual mind of another gospel. Disciples of darkness have followed perverse doctrines with fervency. For ages, the lying spirits have been corrupting multitudes. The religion that has perverted the gospel of Jesus Christ has controlled nations and influenced empires!

We should find salvation in the Word by continuing in the truth; but if we're unwilling to face the light that exposes our sin, we will wrestle the Word to our own harm. If we tailor the truth to fit our flesh, then instead of living like Jesus, we'll live like a man without the truth who only cares for his own desires. If we sensitize our hearts to be quiet—we find His presence in our stillness; then by diligently searching the Scriptures, we begin to learn the spiritual language of Yeshua. *Be still and know that I am God. (Ps. 46:10a)*

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The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge;
the ears of the wise seek it out. (Proverbs 18:15 NIV)

Consider the man who attended seminary and graduated with honors: he learned everything well, but had he been taught the truth? If he had studied the truth, he was the rare exception, because hundreds of other schools of thought would have trained him differently. More than likely, His perceptions were perverted by false teachings, the *opinions* of professors who were more cerebral than spiritual. Some of his teachers had quit believing the Bible altogether, confused by human intellect. How cruel a traitor the mind of man can be!

Now the young graduate finds a church to pastor, and he is thrilled. As the years pass, however, he grows disenchanted with his denomination. In his personal quest to be closer to the Lord, he earnestly seeks the truth of the Word and finds some things he was instructed to believe just don't line up with the Bible.

The problem is, now he's been teaching those doctrines to his own church for several years, and the institution that gave him his job is signing his paycheck. He must decide which to choose: his income or the truth?

He also has a family to provide for, which complicates the already difficult problem. He prays about it, but he doesn't hear an answer from heaven. God is silent. He knows he must put sin to death instead of choosing the ignoble desires of the man he used to be.

What a struggle the cross is! It is warfare against our natural desires, against the carnal flesh that always seeks convenience and comfort rather than the agony of its death. The cross buffets the flesh, but false teachings fatten it with sweetness.

Here is the dilemma of the temple priests: if Jesus had spoken the truth and really was the Son of God, their Messiah, then the Jews had been wrong about their faith for centuries! They'd been looking for a king, not a personal Savior.

Turning to Him, they'd have to admit they'd been teaching the traditions of the rabbis [teachers], but not the truth. If they were to challenge the traditions of their religious culture, they'd lose their jobs and their political standing with the tetrarch, Herod. More than that, if Yeshua actually was Messiah, King of

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the Jews, then Rome would certainly hear about this, and the empire would displace them from the land.

The established institutional churches have done with their own laws and traditions just as the temple rabbis had done—so impressed with themselves that they created their own religions, often far removed from the inspired writings. Today’s churches are also entangled with government dependency, a lot like ancient Judea. Jesus rebuked the synagogue leaders, but though they knew He was right, they refused to change.

So the chief priests and the Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin and said, “What are we going to do since this man does many signs? If we let Him continue in this way, everyone will believe in Him! Then the Romans will come and remove both our place and our nation.”

(John 11:47-48 HCSB)

Is the church prepared for the return of Yeshua? Whether earlier or later than we anticipate, He will come for us at a time we least expect Him. We must redeem the days that remain by seeking Him with all we are and by living in relationship with Him, doing His will by obeying His Word. We must believe in His powerful life at work within us, equipping us to discipline our thoughts, shunning everything evil and unclean by trusting in the purity of His Holy Spirit.

The devil is the prince of the power of the air, but Messiah is the King of kings and Lord of lords. We are His kings and lords if by faith we enter His provision for our holiness. The final Day will arrive—the end of time for everyone. Do we believe all things are possible with God? Even the purity of our thoughts? Are we crucified with our Savior, surrendered with Him in His death, living in His life as He rises to shine from within us, or are we more like sealed tombs? The fear of the Lord should shake us awake.

And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame *and* everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever. (Daniel 12:2-3)

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