

# Knowledge and Conversion

By  
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One of many controversies introduced into the Church of God recently has to do with the relationship of the knowledge of truth to conversion. The idea has been promoted that those lacking even a basic knowledge of true Biblical doctrines ought to be recognized as a part of the body of Christ--members of the true Church--because they have "faith" in Christ.

Exemplifying such reasoning is the following from a recent article in the *Worldwide News*: "Some people search for a 'true church' because they think there are hidden truths. They reason that whatever particular group has these truths must be the true Church of God."

The author goes on to say, "Hidden, mysterious 'truths' become their foundation, and the gospel is pushed into the closet."

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"It is interesting that the apostles did not proclaim any of these hidden truths."

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"Then why do 'true' churches insist that they have special truths that make them authentic and all others frauds? Could it be they have deceived themselves by their desire for the wine of new 'truth'?"

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"The Bible makes it clear that it is not knowing 'special truth' that makes one part of the Church, but knowing Christ by faith" (Earl Williams, "Which Church is God's True Church?," June 14, 1994, p. 4).

How should we answer such assertions? Do they need answering? Perhaps first we should observe that this article seems clearly to be a thinly veiled attack on the long held teaching of the Church of God that the Churches of traditional Christianity do not truly represent the faith that Jesus taught. Rather, they are a product of syncretism, with Christian elements blended together with pagan religious traditions and philosophy--as is clearly evident from history. Distinct from this false, apostate Christianity, the Church taught, is a religious tradition--kept alive among small, scattered, and persecuted groups--that has remained generally faithful to God's word in doctrine and practice.

There's nothing wrong with correcting error--if it's really error. And the Church has not been perfect in all of its teachings, though its errors have been much less in scope and magnitude than its accusers allege. But was the former teaching under discussion in error? And is the "new" (but really, old) teaching true? In the final analysis, this is what counts.

The real point at issue is not whether there were or are other scattered groups of true Christians. The Church has long recognized the historical reality that various groups of true Christians were physically separated from one another. And it's been implicit, though not always expressed, that today there may be other groups of true Christians existing elsewhere as well. The Church has long recognized that there are isolated individuals that God may be working with, calling into his truth, that are not yet associated with the visible, organized Church body. The real issue is this: Are groups that teach and practice doctrines diametrically opposite to those taught in the Bible to be accepted as truly Christian? Are the myriad Churches of traditional Christianity simply different "branches" of the true Church? Is there a "true Church"? Or are all who demonstrate some sort of faith in the name of Jesus

to be fully accepted as true and faithful Christians, though many of the doctrines they believe and follow are based on human tradition in opposition to God's word?

Recent teachings of an apostate leadership within the Worldwide Church of God, the above example is no exception, strive mightily to minimize or even dismiss the significance of doctrine and truth. Thus we see expressed mocking ridicule toward the idea of *truths* that might set apart true followers of the faith of Jesus from others who, though perhaps sincere, are nonetheless deceived. (Interestingly, the faith itself is a mystery, a *hidden truth*--1 Timothy 3:9). Wouldn't it be prudent to be suspicious of religious leaders who denigrate truth? Just how significant is doctrine? How important is it that Jesus' followers know, understand, teach and practice the truth?

We can begin to get the Biblical answer with a few simple observations. Jesus was preeminently a teacher. The Greek verb *didasko*, meaning to teach, is used far more often with respect to Jesus' activities than is the verb *kerusso*, which means to preach, or to proclaim publicly. It's not that the public preaching of the gospel was not important, but even more important was the more in depth *private teaching* of the disciples. The public preaching served as an introduction to the gospel. The private teaching explained its full significance and ramifications. A common title of Jesus was *didaskalos*, teacher. He is never referred to in the New Testament as a *preacher* (this title--*kerux*--is used only three times in the Greek New Testament). This does not mean Jesus was not a preacher. It does mean that his more important role as a *teacher* was widely recognized and is emphasized in Scripture.

The followers of Jesus are called *disciples* (Greek: *mathetes*, a *learner*; from a root *math*, indicating *thought accompanied by endeavor*; see *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, p. 171). They were students--but more than students. They were adherents--imitators--of their teacher. Their commitment to him was to be absolute, and they were to not just hear, but to *abide* in his word (Luke 14:26-27; John 8:31).

### Mysteries of God's Kingdom

Jesus differentiated between the casual listeners to his preaching, and the committed students whom he taught privately. The former he referred to as "those outside" (Mark 4:11). "Those outside" were ones who's eyes were closed to the "mysteries," secret or hidden truths, of the kingdom of God! (See Mark 4:11-12). Many of "those outside" believed in Jesus name, but he did not commit himself to them (John 2:23-25).

Yes, Jesus taught the *mysteries of the Kingdom of God* to his disciples (Matthew 13:11; Luke 8:10). A *mystery* as used in the New Testament usually means truth hidden to the understanding of all but a select group. These truths have been openly proclaimed, as Jesus proclaimed to a multitude the parable of the sower and the seed (Mark 4:1-9). But the *understanding* of the truth is hidden except to those to whom God reveals it. And why are the truths hidden from the many? Jesus explained, "That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they *should be converted*, and their

sins should be forgiven them" (Mark 4:12, KJV). According to Jesus--and contrary to what we read earlier--*the revealing of "hidden truths" is essential to conversion and salvation!*

We've seen that Jesus Christ taught to his disciples the *mysteries* of the Kingdom of God. And they were a very small number among the Jews, even of those who professed belief in his name! What about the apostles who preached after Christ's death?

We read the statement in the article quoted earlier, "It is interesting that the apostles did not proclaim any of these hidden truths." Is this statement true? Or did the apostles, like Christ, teach the *mysteries*, the hidden truths, of the Kingdom of God?

Paul spoke of himself and other ministers of the Church as "stewards of the *mysteries* of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1). Paul said, "...we speak the wisdom of God in a *mystery*, the *hidden wisdom* which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which *none of the rulers of this age knew*.... But God has *revealed them to us* through His Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:7-10). There are a number of other Scriptures, some of which we will discuss later, which refer to the gospel preached by the apostles--or various features of it--as a mystery!

In the *Worldwide News* article quoted earlier it's stated: "The truth is that the gospel is Christ plus nothing." What does this mean? I suppose it's an attempted vindication of the common approach of many preachers to the "gospel": An emotional plea for people to superficially "accept Christ" as Savior. Constant emphasis is placed on the fact that "Christ died for your sins." Little or nothing is said about one's ultimate purpose or destiny, and how it is to be accomplished. While if one reads the fine print he *might* find something about obedience, this is seldom given much emphasis. And the principle of obedience is largely negated in any case because expedience and human tradition is preferred over God's word and commandments as a guide to belief and practice.

Generally speaking, this superficial approach to the gospel accomplishes only a false conversion, if any at all. The true gospel consists of far more than constantly repeating "Jesus died for your sins" and appealing to people to believe in his name--with no real understanding of what either means.

What *mystery*, what "hidden wisdom," did Paul teach? What hidden truth has God revealed through his Spirit to His own Church? Answer: "The *things which God has prepared* for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:6-10). The gospel is *not* just about "Christ plus nothing." The gospel is about God, and about Christ, and about us--mankind. It's about God's Kingdom, His family, and how we fit in. It's about our destiny--God's purpose for humankind and how that purpose is being accomplished!

Paul summarized writing to the Colossians: "...I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, the *mystery* which *has been hidden* from ages and from generations, but now *has been revealed to his saints*. *To them* God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the

Gentiles: which is *Christ in you, the hope of glory*" (1:25-27). Our hope and calling, the mystery of God's eternal purpose, which the world--including most "Christians"--does not know, and how it is accomplished in us by God through Christ, is what the gospel is about. It is about how we are to take our places as children of God in his eternal Kingdom, having been glorified in the image of God the Father and Jesus Christ, to become like them and share eternal life with them (Romans 8:29; Ephesians 1:9-14; 3:1-19; Philippians 3:21; 2 Corinthians 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 3:2). It is a gospel of hope--the only real hope--for all mankind. For God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the *knowledge of the truth*" (1 Timothy 2:4). And his plan will make it possible for everyone to have a full opportunity for salvation.

This knowledge of the very *purpose* of human existence helps to make a profound difference in the lives of God's elect. It is a source not only of hope, but of motivation, joy and endurance. As Herbert W. Armstrong observed: "It is this true knowledge of God's purpose, coupled with the power of his Spirit in them, that produces the unfeigned happiness in the people of God. The hope of a meaningful future is what motivates them to develop godly character, and remain steadfast and joyful, even in the face of setbacks and troubles" (*Where Is the True Church*, p. 35). Scripture confirms the motivating power of such knowledge: "...we know that when He [the Father] is revealed, *we shall be like Him*, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:2-3).

We've already seen that Jesus' ministry was characterized more by teaching than by preaching. And the same is true of the apostles and ministers who continued his work. *Didasko*--to teach--is used more frequently also to describe their activities than is *kerusso*--to preach. The gospel was preached, but it was also taught.

A certain minimal level of knowledge is necessary for initial conversion. At the minimum would be knowledge sufficient to convict one of sin. This implies a basic understanding of the requirements of God's law, because sin (and righteousness) is defined by the law (Romans 3:20; 7:7; 1 John 3:4). After Peter had preached to a group of Jews on the day of Pentecost, they asked, "...what shall we do?" Peter answered, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:37-38). One would have to have some understanding of repentance, and of the promise of salvation through Jesus Christ.

The wicked, lacking essential knowledge, or having rejected it, are perishing. The wicked includes all of us except those redeemed and cleansed through the blood of Jesus Christ, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Proverbs 1 speaks of those who reject the gospel. God says they are destined to "eat the fruit of their own way" because "they hated knowledge" (Proverbs 1:29-31). Judah was taken into captivity, it is said, "because they have no knowledge" (Isaiah 5:13). Hosea prophesied to ancient Israel before her destruction, saying, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have *rejected knowledge*, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; Because you have *forgotten the law of your God*, I also will forget your children" (4:6).

Religious zeal without the knowledge and conviction necessary for true repentance does not produce the fruit of salvation. Amos, another prophet to Israel contemporary with Hosea, remarked on their misguided religious zeal (4:4-5). The nations of Israel and Judah showed love with their mouths, but their hearts were not obedient (Ezekiel 33:30-32). They called upon God's name, claimed to trust and worship him, "but not in *truth* or in *righteousness*" (Isaiah 48:1-2). They wanted to be religious. They wanted to be thought of as God's people. But truth just wasn't that important to them. They did not "plead for truth," but they trusted in "empty words" and spoke lies (Isaiah 59:3-4). As a result their eyes were blinded. While they looked for light, they found only darkness. Despite their religion, there was little truth among them (Isaiah 59:9-15). They practiced a syncretized religion similar in many respects to what passes for Christianity in much of today's world. Like their nation throughout most of its history, and continuing today, as Paul remarked, they had "a *zeal* for God, but *not according to knowledge*" (Romans 10:2). The Gentile nations, too, on the whole have "their *understanding darkened*, being alienated from the life of God, because of the *ignorance* that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart" (Ephesians 4:18).

### **Law, Grace and Truth**

One might ask, how could it be that Israel, having the law, lacked the knowledge of God? Others might think, since Israel had the law, and did not please God, knowledge of the law is not important--all we need is "Christ." In an attempt to support the idea that the law has been "replaced" and is not relevant to salvation, such people have quoted John 1:17, "For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Is this not proof that we need not heed the law, and "faith in Christ" is all that's needed for salvation? Many would have you believe that "Moses' law" was harsh and burdensome, but Christ brought something totally unrelated to what was given before, namely "grace and truth."

It's important that we understand the real meaning and significance of the statement, "the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." It does not say what many assume. In the Greek text of this verse, there is no "but." The definite article is used before both "grace" and "truth." The word "came" is from the Greek *ginomai*, which properly means to come into existence, begin to be, to receive being; though the word carries a wide variety of related meanings. The point is that Jesus Christ is so much greater than Moses, who, as mediator of the Old Covenant, was used to introduce a limited form of God's system of law (which itself embodies grace and truth). Grace and truth, however, *came into being*, began to exist, were *created* through Jesus Christ. Mercy and truth did not begin to exist when Christ was made into flesh. They have always been a part of his nature. Hence they have their being from the Father, God, and to us through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Grace and truth are not contrary to the law. Indeed they are mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament in direct connection with the law (e.g., Psalm 25:10; 40:6-11; 103:1-22; 111:4-10; 119:29-30; Proverbs 3:1-3). It's important to keep in mind whose law, whose commandments, we're discussing. The law that came through Moses was not Moses' law. The people at Mount Sinai did not make a covenant agreeing to keep Moses' law. They agreed to

keep *God's* commandments, which he had spoken to them with his own voice (Exodus 20:1-21; 24:3; Deuteronomy 5). They are referred to as God's commandments throughout Scripture (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 12-13; 8:11; Revelation 22:14). The law is not, as many suppose when reading John 1:17, inimical to grace and truth, nor to faith in Christ.

Would it surprise you to learn that salvation is not through grace *only*. It would many people. Because their ministers have led them to believe that salvation is by grace, and nothing else! Paul wrote, "For by grace you have been [or are being, as in the *Interlinear Bible*] saved *through faith...*" We are saved by grace *working* through faith--not just any faith but *the faith*. The Greek in the verse quoted uses the definite article before "faith." It is a specific faith, encompassing a specific set of beliefs. And that faith, as Paul goes on to say, "is not of yourselves; it is the gift of God." The specific faith instrumental in salvation is from God and is *of God*. It's not only faith in Christ, but the faith *of* Christ (in accordance with the use of the genitive case in the Greek text of Romans 3:22; Galatians 2:16,20 and elsewhere).

### **Elements of Faith**

And what is faith? The Greek word is *pistis*. It means "belief," but more than belief. It's a *firm persuasion*, a belief that *convicts*. As is pointed out in *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (p. 222), there are three main elements in genuine faith towards God. (1) A *firm conviction*, "producing a full acknowledgment of God's revelation or truth." (2) *Personal surrender* to God; i.e., a firm commitment to obeying God in all things. (3) *Conduct* motivated by conviction and surrender.

"Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness"(Romans 4:3). Abraham's belief was not a timid, ambivalent, half-hearted acceptance, but a firm conviction implying unshakable confidence in God. "He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore it was accounted to him for righteousness" (Romans 4:20-22). As Paul points out, this faith was apart from any works. The faith was present *before* the covenant of circumcision was made(Genesis 15:6; 17:1-14). But notice. This first element of faith requires a knowledge of his revelation, of his truth. We need not know everything, of course, but we must have sufficient knowledge on which to base a firm conviction.

One can have knowledge without faith. But one cannot have faith without knowledge. The reason the Israelites failed to please God is not because they did not have the truth available, but because they did not believe nor obey the words spoken to them. "For indeed the gospel was preached to us *as well as to them* [Israel]; but the word which they heard did not profit them, *not being mixed with faith* in those who heard it" (Hebrews 4:2). They heard the true gospel, the message of salvation, but they did not accept it in faith. (There is no "old gospel" and "new gospel" in the Bible, as some allege. There is only one gospel revealed throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, though it is referred to by a variety of descriptive terms--see Romans 10:14-21; Galatians 1:6-9; 3:8; Revelation 14:6).

The Israelites had the "form of knowledge and truth in the law" (Romans 2:20). We see by this Scripture that the law is not inimical to the truth. In fact, according to Scripture, "Your [God's] law is *truth*" and "all Your commandments are *truth*" (Psalm 119:142, 151). But if Israel had the form of truth in the law, why does the Scripture say, "...the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ"? Because although they read the words, most of them did not comprehend, they did not understand, and did not obey. "But their minds were hardened. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament.... But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart" (2 Corinthians 3:14-15).

They had the Scriptures containing the truth. They read the Scriptures. But the truth was *hidden from them!* They lacked faith. And because of their lack of faith, even though they were circumcised and were (at times) careful about certain minutiae of the law, overall obedience was lacking (Matthew 23:23; Romans 2:23-25; Matthew 15:1-9; John 7:19; Galatians 6:13). But when one turns to Christ in genuine faith and repentance that veil is lifted from the Scriptures. Jesus Christ through his Spirit opens our understanding to the truth. "The veil is taken away in Christ," we are told. "When one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away" (II Corinthians 3:14, 16). God's purpose--to create us in holiness and righteousness in the image of his glory--becomes plain to those being saved. But that purpose is still hidden from the understanding of those to whom the gospel is veiled and who are perishing in their flesh (2 Corinthians 3:18; 4:1-6).

Grace and truth come through Jesus Christ not because he has disposed of the commandments of God, but because he *reveals to our understanding* the truth inherent in God's law. And as we grow in the understanding of that truth we grow also in faith. "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). Remember we are saved by grace *through* faith. So as we grow in the knowledge of Christ--not just about him, though that's important, but also of what he's accomplishing in us and how--we may grow in grace as well (2 Peter 3:18).

I repeat, faith requires knowledge, learning, an understanding of God's word which is given by Christ through the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote to Timothy, "...continue in the things which you have *learned* and been assured of, knowing *from whom* you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known *the Holy Scriptures*, which are able to make you *wise for salvation through faith* which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for *doctrine*, for reproof, for correction, for instruction *in righteousness*..." (II Timothy 3:14-16). This brings us to the second and third elements of Godly faith. We must *surrender* our will to God's, committing ourselves unconditionally to *obeying all* his commandments. And we must follow up that commitment with the *works* of obedience according to God's laws.

Consider again Abraham's example. Initially, his faith, apart from any works, was counted as righteousness. But what if Abraham had *remained* without works? Would God have continued to account him as righteous? God told Abraham, "I am Almighty God; *walk before*

*Me and be blameless.* And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly. Then Abraham fell on his face..." (Genesis 17:1-3). Abraham was yielded to God's will, committed to keeping his commandments and to teaching his children to do the same. God said, "For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him"(Genesis 18:19). Later God put Abraham's faith to the test again, requiring him to offer his only son, Isaac, as a burnt offering (Genesis 22:1-2). You know the story. Abraham obeyed, only God intervened at the last minute and provided a ram to be sacrificed in place of his son. Abraham's works of obedience were not contrary to, nor even separate from, his faith. The works were engendered by faith and were themselves a *necessary* element of faith.

James explains: "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?... Someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.... Do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith *was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect* [or 'complete']?" So, says James, "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only" (James 2:14-24). Notice that in order to be *complete*, faith must engender works. Hence the works of faith are an element of faith. That is why Paul said, "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law" (Romans 3:31). Many deceived teachers have misunderstood and misapplied Paul's writings concerning this question of faith and works (2 Peter 3:14-18). But Paul, too, like James, understood that the works of faith are an element of faith. Paul wrote that Abraham is "the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk *in the steps of the faith* which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised" (Romans 4:12).

### **Works Without Faith**

Israel, even though they had the law, did not walk after--did not obey--God's commandments as Abraham did--because they lacked faith. "...to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who *did not obey*? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief [lack of faith]"(Hebrews 3:18-19). With faith is obedience. Without faith is disobedience. Paul understood that without faith works of the law are not sufficient for salvation. One may do certain works of the law, yet not have faith.

Paul himself had been a Pharisee, and an exceptionally zealous one. Paul said he was "concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless"(Philippians 3:5-6). Notice that Paul was, concerning the law, a Pharisee. His view, his understanding of the law, was that of the Pharisees. The Pharisees saw the law not through the faith of Jesus Christ, but through the lens of their own manmade traditions (Mark 7:1-13). From the standpoint of practicing the pharisaical view of the law, based on their tradition, Paul was blameless. But, he was not blameless before God. He

had been a persecutor and murderer of Christians (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2; 1 Corinthians 15:9). He saw himself, despite the zeal that he had for pharisaical tradition, the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:13-15).

The pharisaical tradition, by the time of Jesus, had developed (one might say degenerated) into an array of petty rules having to do with the minutiae of the law. It focused on physical works which had little to do with the spirit and intent of the law, and which in fact violated the law (Matthew 15:1-9; Mark 7:1-13; John 7:19; Galatians 6:13). Pharisaism and rabbinism are not the same, but they are closely related. Most Pharisees were not scribes (ordained scholars of the law trained from an early age). Not all scribes were Pharisees. But "Pharisaic scribes were by far the most numerous" (*Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, p. 243). And they were the most influential. The tradition (passed on orally into the second century A.D., but finally committed to writing) preserved in the *Mishna* is exclusively the pharisaic rabbinical tradition. (Scribes, as teachers of the law, were called "Rabbi," meaning *master*, although others were sometimes according this title as well. In the New Testament they are also referred to by the term "Lawyer"). Paul, besides being a Pharisee, was also a scribe and a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council and highest court among the Jews (Acts 22:1-4, 26:10).

The scribes created and transmitted the pharisaic traditions. The body of authoritative traditional law which they formulated, called the *Halakah* (which is the subject of and preserved in the *Mishnah*), is *extra*-biblical. Although authoritative for Jews, the Halakoth were not necessarily supported by Scripture, but were intended as a "hedge" about the law, to prevent any possibility of its being broken. Yet, in doing this very thing they were *breaking* the law, for God had said, "You *shall not add* to the word which I command you, nor *take anything from it*, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you" (Deuteronomy 4:2; also 12:32). In adding the weight of their tradition to the law of God they bound "heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders" (Matthew 23:3). They placed the authority of their traditions *above* that of Scripture itself, thus blaspheming the word of God.

Jeremias points out that the oral tradition was "above the Torah" (p. 236), and that the esoteric writings containing scribal teachings were regarded as inspired and surpassing the canonical books "in value and sanctity" (pp. 238-239). Edersheim also points out that traditional law was of "even greater obligation than Scripture itself" (p. 68; or in the original edition 1.98; also see his footnote).

### **Traditions Made Void the Law**

What was the nature of these traditional ordinances? Alfred Edersheim, born a Jew but later converted to Christianity, was a 19th century authority on Jewish doctrines and practices before and during the time of Christ. He summarizes the character of the traditional law as follows: "The *Halakah* indicated with the most minute and painful punctiliousness every legal ordinance as to outward observance.... But beyond this it left the inner man, the spring of actions, untouched."

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"Israel had made void the Law by its traditions. Under a load of outward ordinances and observances its spirit had been crushed" (*Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, pp. 73, 75; or 1.106, 108). The rules of Sabbath observance are a good illustration of the absurdities and contradictions of the traditional law. Again summarizing, Edersheim writes concerning the rules of Sabbath observance, "On no other subject is Rabbinic teaching more painfully minute and more manifestly incongruous to its professed object." He charges the Scribes with "terribly exaggerated views on the Sabbath" and "endless burdensome rules with which they encumbered everything connected with its sanctity" (pp. 509, 510; or 2.52, 53). "In not less than twenty-four chapters [of the *Mishna*], matters are seriously discussed [regarding Sabbath observance] as of vital religious importance, which one would scarcely imagine a sane intellect would seriously entertain" (p. 1046; or 2.778). Yet one would look in vain for a spiritually meaningful understanding of the Sabbath: "...in all these wearisome details there is not a single trace of anything spiritual--not a word even to suggest higher thoughts on God's holy day and its observance" (p. 1047; or 2.779).

I'll list a few details to give you the flavor of what he's talking about. The *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* provides a more detailed discussion of traditional Sabbath law in an appendix. The law included detailed regulations regarding what constituted carrying a "burden": Of wine, of milk, of honey, of water, of other fluids. Of dry materials: Pieces of paper, horses hairs, wax, a piece of broken earthenware, animal food. Generally a burden was anything heavy as a dried fig, or a quantity sufficient to be of any practical use (a scrap of paper, for example, of enough size to be converted into a note or a wrapper). It prescribed what might or might not be saved if one's house caught on fire. Only clothes absolutely necessary, for example, could be saved. But one could put on a dress, save it, go back and put on another, and so on. One could not ask a Gentile to extinguish the flames. But if he did so voluntarily, he should not be hindered. One could eat food on the Sabbath lawfully only if it had been specifically prepared for the Sabbath on a weekday. If a laying hen laid an egg on the Sabbath, it could not be eaten. But if the hen had been kept for fattening and not laying, the egg could be eaten, being considered a part of the hen that had fallen off! The study of the *Mishna* on the Sabbath was more important than that of the Bible. The *Hagiographa* (the Old Testament "Writings") were not to be read on the Sabbath except in the evening. And on and on it goes in like fashion.

Of special interest to us are the laws regarding harvesting and healing on the Sabbath. Even the slightest activity involving picking grain, removing the husks, rubbing the heads, cleaning or bruising the ears, or throwing them up in the hand was forbidden. Yet if a man wanted to move a sheaf on his field, he had only to lay a spoon on it, then, in order to remove the spoon he might also remove the sheaf on which it lay! It should be noted that most of the Jews paid little attention to these petty rules, though the Pharisees (whose numbers were relatively few compared to the general population) did. When the Pharisees took Jesus' disciples to task for plucking heads of grain from a ripe field and eating them on the Sabbath, Jesus (as he often did) turned the contradictions in their own traditional laws against them. He pointed out how David and his followers had eaten the shewbread on a particular occasion, which ordinarily only the priests were allowed to eat. Jewish tradition vindicated his conduct, though for the wrong

reasons. The priests in the temple work on the Sabbath and are guiltless. This the Scribes also knew without clearly understanding why. Somehow they missed the point that the Sabbath was instituted not only to rest from one's own physical labors, but also to devote the time to God by doing *his* works and service. As Edersheim observes, the disciples actions were "clearly not a breach of the Biblical, but of the Rabbinic Law" (p. 512; or 2.56).

Healing is a particularly appropriate activity for the Sabbath, in part because it typifies the healing--both physical and spiritual--that shall occur during the millennial reign of Christ and beyond (see Isaiah 35:5-6; 57:16-20; Ezekiel 47:8-10, 12). The Scribes thought differently, though. Healing, inasmuch as it might entail work, was permitted on the Sabbath only if necessary to save life or to prevent death. Thus a plaster might be applied to a wound if the object was to prevent it from getting worse, but not to heal it. Wadding to promote healing could not be put in the ear on the Sabbath, but could be worn if placed in the ear before the Sabbath. Yet, contrarily, a splinter might be removed from the eye, or a thorn from the body, though no immediate danger to life was perceived. Furthermore, an animal might be removed from a pit, or taken to water on the Sabbath. When Jesus was accused of violating the law by healing on the Sabbath, he used the Pharisees own contradictory rules to convict them of hypocrisy (Mark 3:4; Luke 13:15; 14:5).

### **Obedience Through Faith**

Paul, then, being a scribe of the Pharisees, was well acquainted with the unprofitableness of "works of the law" apart from faith. Being converted, he also understood the value of obedience to the law of God through faith, just as James did. A good example is Galatians 2:16. In consulting more than half a dozen versions of the Bible I've found none that translates this verse clearly all the way through. The NKJV is typical of most translations: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified." In this translation are at least two key errors that affect the meaning significantly.

The first error is this: Where the translation reads "faith in Jesus Christ" and "faith in Christ," it should read, to be faithful to the Greek text and Paul's meaning, "faith *of* Jesus Christ" and "faith *of* Christ."

Secondly, the word "but" can mean "contrariwise" or it can mean "except." Most people reading this verse as translated above naturally understand it as follows: "...not justified by the works of the law, but [to the contrary] by faith in Jesus Christ..." However, this is *not* how the Greek reads. The Greek term translated "but" is *ean me*. It *does not* mean contrariwise. It means "if not," or "unless," or "except." The correct translation of this phrase is: "...not justified by works of law [definite articles absent in the Greek], *unless* [or *except*] through faith of Jesus Christ..." This changes the meaning entirely. Works *do* play a role in our ultimate justification *if* done through the faith of Christ. This is fully consistent with Paul's statements elsewhere, for example, in speaking of "obedience of faith" (Romans 16:26).

When discussing the controversies concerning the law in the early Church, one must keep in mind what the Jews thought of as "law." It included not just the law written in the Old Testament, but the traditions, or customs, which had become attached to the law over centuries. And remember, the Jews were taught that the *law of tradition* had *greater authority* than that of Scripture. The issues before the churches of Galatia were largely (though not exclusively) the same as those addressed at the Jerusalem conference described in Acts 15. They were circumcision and keeping the law of Moses. References all the way thorough the book of Galatians are made, not only to the Old Covenant proper, but to Jewish traditional law as well [Galatians 1:12-13; 2:3-4; 10, 12, (alms giving -- good deeds for the poor -- was emphasized by the Pharisees, as were rules of "purity," which included not eating with Gentiles), 14; 3:3; 6:12]. The Jew's focus at this time, with regard to the law of Moses, as we have seen, was mostly on the purely carnal, or fleshly, ordinances and the physical observances with which the traditional law was concerned (compare Acts 15:5, 10; 21:21-25).

Jews were normally circumcised as infants, before there exists any possibility of significant knowledge or faith. Yet to many of them circumcision was a badge of their acceptance before God. But were they automatically more acceptable to God than Gentiles whose circumstances of birth were different? Paul answered, "You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,' as it is written. For circumcision is indeed profitable *if you keep the law*, but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. Therefore, if an uncircumcised man *keeps the righteous requirements of the law*, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he *fulfills the law*, judge you who with letter [literal translation, referring to the letter written on stone, but not in the heart, compare verse 29, 2 Corinthians 3:3, 6; Hebrews 8:10] and circumcision, are a *transgressor of the law*?" (Romans 2:23-27).

Paul concluded that "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but *faith working through love*" (Galatians 5:6). And since love is keeping the spirit of the law, Paul also wrote, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but *keeping the commandments of God* is what matters" (1 Corinthians 7:19). Paul taught that those of faith were obliged to "present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God" (Romans 6:13). He preached the gospel and Jesus Christ, "according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret since the world began...for *obedience of faith*" (as the Greek is correctly rendered; Romans 16:25-26).

The obedience of Christlike faith requires knowledge. The Israelites, God says, went "astray in their heart, and they have not *known* my ways" (Hebrews 3:10). The Greek word *ginosko* usually means to know *and understand*. Israel had God's law, but not the *understanding* of it. Hence, they went astray in their hearts. Jesus said, "If you *abide in My word*, you are my disciples *indeed* [or "truly," my true disciples]. And you shall *know* [and *understand*] *the truth*, and the *truth shall make you free*" (John 8:31-32).

**The Law of Liberty**

May I interject a personal anecdote. I did not grow up in the Church of God. When I was eight years old, I was baptized in a Baptist church. I attended church regularly as I grew up, and was a reasonably serious convert to the religion I knew. After high school, I began attending college, and some while after I began college I became a Baptist minister, and pastor of a small church. The people I ministered to were fine, dear people. They were gentle and hospitable, and I spent many hours in the homes of various members of the church. I still have very fond memories of those people. As fine and hospitable as they were, though, they were not converted. And neither was I! Our minds were largely closed to spiritual truth. A genuine understanding of Scripture was sealed off by a cloud of confusing false doctrine. We had virtually no real understanding of the central core of the gospel, which is God's purpose for mankind and how he is accomplishing it. I only began to really understand the Scriptures when I began reading the literature of God's Church.

God was opening my mind to the understanding of the *truth*. And I began preaching some of it to my little congregation. But, to the time of my resignation, their minds remained sealed to true Biblical understanding. Do I condemn them because they were not converted? Absolutely not. Do I deceive myself that because they had some fine qualities as human beings and a degree of religious zeal, they were converted? Absolutely not.

The true disciples of Jesus have a knowledge and understanding of spiritual truth, a comprehension of the Bible, that others simply don't have. That truth is a *liberating* truth. Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit liberates our minds from false doctrine to give us understanding of his word (2 Corinthians 3:14-17). What was before the law that only condemned us, becomes a law of liberty and of life (Psalm 119:44-45; James 1:25; Romans 7:10; 8:1-10). A genuine follower of Jesus Christ is no longer hostile to God's law (Romans 8:7; Psalm 119:97). He does not regard the requirement to obey God's commandments with scornful contempt, labeling it "legalism," or some other epithet (Psalm 1:1-2; 119:126-128; 158-160).

A true disciple of Jesus knows him and is known of him (1 John 5:20; 2 Timothy 2:19). To be "known" of God, in this sense, implies being *approved* of him (see *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, p. 346). The one to whom Christ reveals himself is he who loves him, and "who has My commandments and keeps them" (John 14:21). Truly knowing God is linked inseparably with knowing, understanding and keeping his commandments. To bear spiritual fruit we must abide in Christ, and he in us. And for us to abide in Christ requires that his words abide in us (John 15:7). Christians are to abound "more and more in *knowledge* and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent [or distinguish between the lawful and the unlawful]...being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:9-11). We are to "be filled with the *knowledge* of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may have a *walk worthy* of the Lord, *fully pleasing Him*, being fruitful in every good work and *increasing in the knowledge* of God" (Colossians 1:9-10). We must "put on the new man who is *renewed* [changed into a new creature, a new kind of life] in *knowledge* according to the image of Him who created him"

(Colossians 3:10). Knowledge is necessary to grow into the likeness of Christ.

### **The Key of Knowledge**

Jesus said, "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the *key of knowledge*. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered" (Luke 11:52). Knowledge is a key to God's Kingdom. One way in which they took away the key of knowledge was by teaching false doctrine. Jesus indicted them for "teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men.... All too well you *reject the commandment of God* that you may keep your tradition." Their traditions made "the word of God of no effect" (Mark 7:6-9, 13). The traditions which ostensibly were to uphold the law actually impeded its proper observance. The traditions, such as those concerning the Sabbath that were discussed earlier, added grievous and unnecessary burdens which hindered the spiritual understanding and observance of the law (Matthew 23:4; Luke 11:46; Acts 15:10).

There's yet another way in which the scribes took away the key of knowledge. The knowledge (some of it true, much of it false) guarded by the scribes was exegetical, juridical, theosophical, cosmological and apocalyptic. But much of it, if not most, was esoteric, not shared with the masses, but kept secret among the scribes themselves. This included "Reasons of the Torah," the vital knowledge of *why* God established particular laws. Such knowledge was thought too holy to share, and it was reasoned that God would have the people to remain ignorant of it. Though the *Halakah*, traditional law, was taught publicly, it was forbidden to pass it on except orally, since it was the "secret of God." (As noted earlier it was eventually put in writing in the second century A.D.). The scribes even sought to keep the Old Testament from direct access to the masses, fighting attempts to make it available in the common Aramaic dialect. (See *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, pp. 237-243, for a discussion of the esoteric nature of scribal knowledge. It should be noted that copies of the Greek translation, the Septuagint, were relatively cheap and plentiful).

The approach of Jesus Christ and the apostles was, overall, much more liberal with respect to sharing knowledge. As discussed earlier, in depth teaching was not done publicly, either by Jesus or the apostles, for practical reasons. One of Jesus primary missions, of course, was to train his apostles so they could carry on his work after his death. Although he often preached and taught publicly, he did not invite large numbers of people into his inner circle. And the teaching of the "mysteries of the Kingdom," as noted, was reserved for them. The apostles were commissioned to go to all nations and make disciples, and teach them obedience (Matthew 28:19-20). Paul, as an example, sought "to preach the gospel of the unsearchable riches of Christ among the nations, and to *bring all to light*, what is the fellowship of the mystery having been hidden from eternity in God..." (Ephesians 3:8-9, *Interlinear Bible*). Even so, the deeper wisdom, of necessity, could be taught only to the spiritually mature, those prepared to receive it (1 Corinthians 2:6-8; 3:1-2; Hebrews 5:12-14). Yet, Paul could write, "...if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). When God's Kingdom is at last established on the earth, to reign

over it (Daniel 7:13-14, 27; Revelation 11:15-17), and Satan is bound (Revelation 20:1-3), God will send forth his law, his word (Isaiah 2:3), and "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9).

Spiritual knowledge is not something simply to be taught, however. It must be *learned*, with active involvement of the student. The Kingdom of God must be sought after (Matthew 6:33; 13:45-46; Romans 2:7). We are told, "...*incline your ear* to wisdom, and *apply your heart* to understanding; yes, if you *cry out* for discernment, and *lift up your voice* for understanding, if you *seek* her as silver, and *search* for her as for hidden treasures; *then* you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God" (Proverbs 2:2-5). The true gospel of the Kingdom of God is not a know nothing, do nothing gospel.

God blesses the one whose "delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates [or ponders] day and night" (Psalm 1:2). We are to ask God for wisdom (James 1:5). And we are to approach His word with reverence and respect, in a spirit of humility and contriteness (Isaiah 66:2). "Be *diligent*," we are told, "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). James wrote, "...he who *looks into* the perfect law of liberty [God's word, compare verses 21-22; Luke 4:4] and *continues* in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a *doer of the work*, this one *will be blessed* in what he *does*" (James 1:25). Paul wrote to Timothy, "...*continue* in the things which you have *learned* and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to *make you wise for salvation* through faith which is in Christ Jesus. *All Scripture* is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

### **Gnostic Heresies**

As the above Scripture implies, our knowledge in spiritual matters must be guided by, and derived from, the word of God--the Bible (see also Isaiah 8:20; 66:2; Luke 4:4). Very early in the history of the Church there arose teachers and their followers claiming the name Christian, and claiming superior knowledge. But their doctrines were derived from sources other than Scripture. The heresies they taught are today known as *Gnostic* heresies--or Gnosticism (after the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*). The treatise of Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, is a primary source of information about Gnosticism, and one of the earliest. Irenaeus traces the origin of Gnosticism to Simon Magus (I,XXIII,2; II,preface,1), a Samaritan teacher. (Most Gnostic teachers were of Samaritan or Egyptian origin). Gnosticism is not a single doctrine because each Gnostic teacher developed his own doctrines (Irenaeus, I,XXI,1; I,XXVIII,1), so only the broadest generalizations may be made. In general, Gnosticism was a syncretistic blend of oriental mystery religion, Greek philosophy and elements of Christianity, and, sometimes, Judaism (or its Samaritan counterpart, but many Gnostic teachers were rabidly anti-Jewish).

The earliest Gnostics claimed to be Jews (often falsely) and placed emphasis on not only the burdensome Jewish traditional law, but also on theosophic Jewish fables relating to the origins

and nature of the spiritual realms and the universe, eschatology, and the practice of magic (see *The Life and Epistles of Paul*, pp. 353-360, 691, for a discussion of the Jewish elements in Gnosticism). Cerinthus was a Judaizing Gnostic active for a long period beginning not long after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He was "educated in the wisdom of the Egyptians," according to Irenaeus (I,XXVI,1). The "wisdom of Egypt" included both its mystery religions and Greek philosophy. The Egyptian culture and its mystery religions were a very powerful influence on Greek philosophy, especially Platonism, and the two were closely intertwined. Egyptian and other oriental mystery religions were extremely popular in the Hellenistic (and Roman) world.

Cerinthus is also linked to the "Ebionites" by Irenaeus (I,XXVI,2), and others. "Ebionites" was an epithet applied to a remnant of the Jerusalem church that held fast to the commandments of God, and--a segment of them--to some of the traditional Jewish observances. Ebionite Gnostics (not to be confused with the Jerusalem church remnant) were Gnostics, like Cerinthus, who, in addition to teaching other confusing doctrines, laid great stress on circumcision and traditional Jewish law. It's possible that, as some scholars have believed, the heresy in Galatia, prompting Paul's epistle, was incited by Cerinthus and his followers. Later, after the Church became predominantly Gentile, Gnosticism was for the most part virulently anti-Jewish.

Gleaned from Irenaeus are some of the characteristics and teachings of Gnostics, as follows: They claimed secret, mystical knowledge of the spirit realms, and this knowledge, along with related magical incantations, is the basis of salvation (I,XII,6; I,XXI,4; I,XXIV,6; I,XXVII,3). The antinomian Gnostics (of which were the majority) taught that Jesus abolished the law and the prophets, and that being free of law, they could do as they please with impunity (I,XXIII,3; I,XXV,4; I,XXVII,2). Those who are spiritual have no need to be concerned how they conduct themselves, because for them works or conduct has nothing to do with salvation (I,VI,2-4; I,XXIII,3). They used the name of Jesus Christ, called themselves Christian, and used terms and expressions from Scripture, distorting their true meaning, often through the device of allegory (I,Preface,2; I,III,1-6; I,VII,1; I,IX,4; I,XIX,1-2). Irenaeus said they could dress up error so that to the unwary it would seem "more true than the truth itself" (I,Preface,2).

Some of them represented the God of the Old Testament as an inferior demiurge, sometimes identical with Satan, or sometimes inferior to Satan. Jesus was sent by the "father who is above the God that made the world," (the latter the God of the Old Testament), to abolish his works and law and save those who believe (in Jesus) from his power (I,V,1-6; I,XXIV,1-4; I,XXVII,2). Jesus despised the God of the Old Testament and, though educated in Jewish practices, despised them (I,XXV,1-2). (It is true that Jesus denounced elements of Jewish traditional law and the hypocrisy of its proponents, but the Gnostics, and later others claiming to be Christian, misrepresented the Christ's sentiments as much more extreme). They taught that Christ, being spirit, the mind (*nous*) of the Father, did not die (I,XXIV,4; I,XXVI,1).

They used images of pagan deities in their worship (I,XXIII,4), and had no scruples about eating idol sacrifices, "maintaining that God does not greatly regard such matters" (I,VI,3; I,XXIV,5; I,XXVIII,2). They readily took part in the celebration of heathen festivals (I,VI,3).

Some of the Gnostics were ascetics, forbidding marriage and the eating of animal flesh (I,XXIV,2).

Their doctrines concerning the divine nature are in some ways similar to the Trinity doctrine, which is not surprising, since both owe a great deal to Platonism and Egyptian concepts of deity. Valentinus championed the concept of a tripartite Pleroma. "One God" consisting of an Ogdoad, Decad and a Duodecad (groups of 8, 10 and 12, respectively); altogether 30 "Aeons" (emanations from the divine substance) existing coordinately and coeternally with the Deity (I,I,3). The concepts of Valentinus and his disciples regarding the nature of the Deity are very much like those of Plotinus (*circa* 204-270 A.D., founder of Neo-Platonism) and his successors. God is one, or unity, incomprehensible, beyond all thought, speech or nomenclature (I,II,5; I,XI,3). Only the Aeons emanating from the Deity in Valentinus' system are tetrads (groups of four), and in Neo-Platonism they are triads (or trinities, groups of three).

The apostles vigorously opposed Gnostic heresies. Numerous statements in their writings, and several books of the Bible, were written specifically to combat Gnostic heresies. Some Gnostic teachers arose within the Church of the apostles, wreaking havoc. Others maintained separate assemblies apart from the true Church, yet calling themselves Christian. Some of the early "fathers" of the "catholic" Church, Irenaeus and others, continued to fight against Gnosticism, even as its doctrines and practices were almost imperceptibly creeping into that Church. Gnosticism, as mentioned earlier, represents a syncretistic religion blending pagan religion and philosophical concepts with Christianity. Scholars (such as Hilgenfeld and Overbeck) have correctly understood it as the Hellenization of Christianity, accomplishing in the first century "a result which was only obtained by a gradual process in Catholic Christianity" (*The Triumph of Christendom in the Roman Empire*, Appendix 2, p. 359).

Traditional Christianity, unfortunately, has in its doctrines and practices perpetuated many of the errors of Gnosticism, particularly the principles by which it operated: Blending elements of Christian belief with pagan religion and philosophy. Adoption of heathen festivals and customs. Rejection of God's system of law and government, especially the Sabbaths God made holy and tithing. The use of Christ's name to teach a religion that he did not teach. The use of Biblical terms and phrases to teach polluted, false doctrines. The teaching of concepts of deity borrowed from pagan religion and philosophy that are completely foreign to Scriptural teachings.

### **Guard the Truth**

We are warned and admonished by Scripture, "Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and vain babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge--by professing it, some have strayed concerning the faith" (1 Timothy 6:20). The blending of the worship of the true God with forms, symbols, doctrines, practices borrowed from heathen worship is a snare we are instructed to avoid. We are to carefully observe God's commandments, and neither add to nor take away from what he has given us to obey (Deuteronomy 12:30-32). In this same context we are instructed concerning any who would entice us to worship after the manner of the heathen, regardless of his seeming authority or closeness to us. "...you shall not

consent to him or listen to him..." (Deuteronomy 13:8). By such means God tests our love towards him, and he commands us, "You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice, and you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him" (verses 3-4).

The ministers of God are warned against departing "from the way," causing others "to stumble at the law" (Malachi 2:8). We are warned that those who follow leaders who teach lies, causing the people to err, will be destroyed (Isaiah 9:15-16). We are instructed, "Go from the presence of a foolish man, when you do not perceive in him the lips of knowledge" (Proverbs 14:7). We are urged to "note those who cause division and offenses *contrary to the doctrine which you learned*, and avoid them" (Romans 16:17). We are warned of those who promise a false "liberty," causing those who had escaped the pollutions of the world to become entangled in them again. "For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them" (2 Peter 2:19-21). These are serious matters, to which we would be wise to give careful study and thought in fasting and prayer.

Christians need not stumble about in confusion "always learning and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7). Knowing the truth of God and of Christ, believing and obeying it is crucial to salvation. It is what makes us God's Church. We have been chosen by God for salvation "through sanctification by the Spirit *and belief in the truth*" (2 Thessalonians 2:13). The spirit of lawlessness works to deceive "those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved" (verse 10). But the secret of God is with the upright (Proverbs 3:32). Jesus prayed to the Father that those belonging to him would be sanctified by the truth (John 17:17). The truth *does* set apart from others those who are Christ's. The Church belonging to Christ is *sanctified* and cleansed "with the washing of water by the word" (Ephesians 5:26).

Those who know him should be growing in his grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). But it must be true knowledge. The verses just prior warn us about those who twist the epistles of Paul "to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, *beware* lest you also *fall from your own steadfastness*, being led away with the error of the wicked" (2 Peter 3:14-17). God gives wisdom and *understanding* to those who reverence him and *obey his commandments* (Psalm 111:10). And true "knowledge is easy to him who understands" (Proverbs 14:6).

Once having the knowledge of the truth, it's imperative that we hold fast to it. Some of the Scriptures quoted above emphasize that very point. In his admonitions to the Churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, Jesus repeatedly tells them to "hold fast" to those things they had been given (2:25; 3:3, 11). It would be good to read both of those chapters in their entirety for a reminder of what Christ expects of us. The saints--those whom God has made holy and separate from the world--are described as "those who keep [*tereo*, in this context meaning to *observe and hold fast--Thayer's Lexicon*] the *commandments of God and the faith of Jesus*" (Revelation 14:12).

Please, let us abide in the word of Christ, and the true liberty wherewith he makes us free. For if we do abide in his word, we shall be truly his disciples, and he promised, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

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