

# Integrity

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INTEGRITY, a journal published by an independent nonprofit corporation, is intended to be a ministry of reconciliation which utilizes the varied talents of a large community of believers who seek accurately to reveal God to both the church and the world so that all may become one as He is one.

## Touching Thomas

(John 20:1-19)

Why should I have touched His wounds,  
Who asked a measure more than those  
Who only saw, and made His peace their joy?  
Still others, seeing not, will have *His* touch.  
And I, who walked with Him and shared  
A thousand days of common ground,  
But ran away when He was taken off  
To bear the wounds I now have touched —  
These wretched hands have felt the anguish of  
The wounds He took for me.

Little did I know that what I asked  
Was sharing in His pain.  
Yet in his love for me, He let  
My probing hands renew the desecrating  
Thrust of nails and spear;  
And now I know that all along  
His sufferance of our selfish, grasping fingers,  
Seeking only fleshy touch,  
Was of a piece with baring all His wounds.  
How far He had to reach  
To let me touch His side!

— Elton D. Higgs

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March/April 1988

# Integrity

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### Christliness in Each Generation

The articles written for this issue of *Integrity* reflect the struggle Christians go through sorting out how to be salt and light and leaven in the late 20th century! The same week we received Dean Smith's article on racial tensions in the church, both *Newsweek* and *Christianity Today* printed cover stories on the weaknesses about American integration. It seemed the Holy Spirit was trying to keep our magazine timely!

The timeliness did not stop there. In the heat of national primary elections, co-editor Bruce Kilmer turned in a "warning" about Christian/political alliances and included a kind of rule-of-thumb for maintaining political clarity as a Christian.

Then we received Don Crawford's article on why and how we should be wary of placing our faith in anything besides Jesus, God's Son. Perhaps you, too, have had conversations with co-workers, neighbors or fellow church members who have taken great interest in supernatural phenomena. Maybe we have not studied lately the numerous biblical references to the fact that we do live in a world of flesh *and* spirit. Paul wrote that we are engaged in battle "against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." Christians must learn how to discern what is from God and what is not. Don's article provides plenty of material for thought and life application.

One more article came that again gives clear teaching on how to live Christ-like in any century. Hoy Ledbetter's biblical discussion of love and behavior in various cultures is likely to have long term impact on our thinking.

And then we received Elton Higgs' poetic meditation of Christ from "doubting" Thomas' point of view. We suggest you take time to read it slowly, aloud, letting each line point you toward Christ — the only hope for peace of mind and good judgment in any generation!

Diane and Bruce Kilmer  
Co-Editors, *Integrity*

## Neither Jew Nor Greek: Galatians 3:28

DEAN F. SMITH

"There is neither Jew nor Greek." The first part of the tripartite formula of Galatians 3:28 proceeds from the very heart of Paul's letter to the Galatian churches. The separation between Jews and Greeks (or Gentiles) had long been established, and yet the influence of Hellenism (Greek philosophy and culture) was so pervasive throughout the world where Jews were dispersed that it prompted a wave of Jewish "evangelism." Paul played a prominent role in this mission to preserve and promote Judaism, surpassing most of his peers (Galatians 1:14). He, more than most, was sensitive to the differences between Jews and Greeks and the barriers that kept them apart. However, when Christ was revealed to Paul, his entire outlook was transformed. Maintaining the exclusiveness of his status was regarded as loss in exchange for the "far-surpassing worth" of being included "in Christ." From that point on, Paul would recognize that the barriers that had formerly existed between Jews and Greeks had now been dismantled in Christ, and that this reality was at the heart of the gospel of Christ. Thus, Paul's response in Galatians against those Jewish Christians who were attempting to rebuild those barriers — by compelling Gentile Christians to observe the cultic laws of Judaism — is uncompromising.

There were primarily two ways that this distinction between Jews and Gentiles was maintained. First, the convert (if a male) was to be circumcised. Second, he or she was to observe the food regulations of a kosher table. Perhaps the second requirement was more significant than the first. Since the majority of Jews in the first century did not live in Palestine, the geographical boundaries which had previously separated Israel from the nations were replaced by the boundaries of one's own

table and who was invited to it. We see the significance of this in the story, in Acts 10, of the conversion of Cornelius, a devout Roman centurion to whom Peter proclaims the gospel message. The recounting of that pivotal event in the church's history is prefaced by Luke with the story of a vision which came to Peter. A voice in this vision commanded him to disregard his scruples about food and eat what was considered to be common and unclean. The dissolution of food regulations which separated Jews and Gentiles became the basis for preparing Peter to preach the gospel to Gentiles. The consequence of this becomes apparent in chapter 11 when Peter returns to Jerusalem and is criticized by the "circumcision party" for eating with Gentiles. Of course, we are reminded that this is not the first time in the New Testament that someone is criticized for eating with the wrong crowd. One of the chief criticisms against Jesus was that he failed to recognize the religious and social implications of his table fellowship with sinners, a practice that made the religious community uncomfortable. In retrospect, we can see that Jesus understood those implications very well and they were, in fact, at the very heart of his ministry.

### Table Fellowship

All of this background is an attempt to address the issue that is often raised concerning this letter as to whether Paul is concerned with how Gentiles are included in Christ, or what are the implications of their inclusion (specifically their relationship with Jewish Christians). The answer to this question is that Paul is concerned about both issues. Although the issue of salvation by faith in Jesus is obviously primary, the social implications that we

have previously addressed are not overlooked by Paul. In chapter two, verses 11ff Paul refers to an incident which took place in Antioch many years before, which he employs to demonstrate his understanding of the social implications for Jews and Gentiles who are "in Christ." For some time, Peter, Barnabas and Paul, along with some other Jewish brothers and sisters, had put aside the food regulations that would have separated them from Gentile Christians and openly enjoyed full table fellowship with them. This practice continued until a delegation from the Jerusalem church arrived. Fearing that they would be uncomfortable or even critical, both Peter and Barnabas, along with many other Jewish Christians, withdrew from fellowship with their brothers and sisters "in Christ" who were Gentiles.

Paul's confrontation with Peter on this issue is bold and unyielding. Before everyone, Paul confronted Peter with his "hypocrisy" and accused him of not "walking straight" (the same word from which we derive our word orthopedic) according to the "truth of the gospel." For Paul, the behavior of Peter and Barnabas was a marked departure from the straight path of the gospel, and could not be justified under *any* circumstances. In fact, one must assume from Paul's earlier statements, that such actions were actually a perversion of the gospel of Christ. It is instructive for us to note that Paul is so convinced of the danger of such actions that he feels compelled to confront both Peter and Barnabas publicly and in no uncertain terms. (Perhaps this might serve as a further explanation for the break-up of Paul and Barnabas as a missionary team which takes place, ironically, after the conference in Jerusalem (in Acts 15).

Since the Christian church no longer faces the problems of circumcision and scruples about food as issues of inclusion "in Christ," how does this part of the formula in Galatians 3:28 apply to us? I will address this, following Paul's example, in two parts. First, what should be our attitude toward the Jewish community and, in particular, the Hebrew scriptures (what we refer to as the Old Testament) as a church that is now virtually non-Jewish? Second, what should be our attitude and behavior toward other

"Gentiles" in the church? I use the term "Gentiles" here as a metaphor for outsiders or those who are different from us either racially or culturally or both.

### Shifting From Our Roots

Perhaps the greatest irony of the Christian church (certainly the most tragic one) is the fact that, rooted and nourished in Judaism and the Hebrew scriptures, it quickly shifted from an exclusively Jewish sect to an almost exclusively non-Jewish, and often anti-Jewish, one. The chief cause of this is to be found in a long history of mutual suspicion, exclusion and persecution that began in the first century and continues even today. Although we live in a society that regularly reminds us of the presence of antisemitism, we fail to realize that often the underlying rationale is a religious or theological one. It begins with developing a false dichotomy between the Old Testament and the New Testament as "law" and "gospel." This perspective has traditionally led Christians to either devalue or completely reject the Old Testament. Such an effort in Germany during the 1930's actually became part of the rationale for what we now refer to as the Holocaust — an attempt to exterminate the entire Jewish race.

It began several years earlier when a group of German Biblical scholars proposed a new national religion for Germans that would be authentically Christian, devoid of all Jewish elements including the Old Testament. They formulated a program of "ninety-five principles" modeled, ironically, upon the ninety-five theses of Luther, and unveiled it on the 400th anniversary of those theses in 1917. Among its demands was a call for abandoning all use of the Old Testament for Christians, since the Jewish religion lacked the "spiritual" qualities of Christianity. As one author of this period (H.S. Chamberlain, *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*) commented, the Old Testament was a "purely historical work." The result was an attempt to sweep away as irrelevant all of the history of God's dealings with Israel, the people of God, and write an entirely new history under the sovereign rule of the Fuhrer, rather than God.

Paul's writings in the New Testament are a

continual reminder to Christians that the gospel is "the power of God unto salvation to *everyone* who believes — to the Jew first and to the Greek" (Romans 1.16b). After all, how can one truly comprehend the meaning of Jesus' life and death apart from an understanding of God's dealings with Israel? The Hebrew scriptures served as the only source for the early church to understand and give expression to what God was doing in Christ. Indeed, to reject that history is to renounce our heritage as "children of Abraham" and the sovereignty and faithfulness of God. This Paul refuses to do. God's future is for all people, both Jews and Gentiles alike. For one day we will all sit at table with "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." (Perhaps we may even recline in Abraham's bosom, although that place of honor appears to be reserved for those less fortunate in this life.) If we are to be faithful to the gospel, it must be the good news of God's grace from Genesis to Revelation — to Israel and the church. This will help us to avoid the reactionary tendency that mistakenly assumes that all of the "law" is in the Old Testament and all of the "gospel" is in the New Testament. (Even a superficial reading of Galatians should cast suspicion on that assumption.) From this artificial dichotomy comes the temptation to construct from the New Testament a legal system of relating to God. We are blinded to this error because by our naive assumption we have already identified the material in the New Testament "as pure grace" and therefore safe for any kind of use. Such a conclusion is precisely one of the dangers that the principle of "law" poses to the good news of grace.

### A Church for All People

The second issue that this reality of "neither Jew nor Greek" addresses is the proper concern of the church for the acceptance of all people, regardless of their racial and cultural differences. We have functioned for the last two decades under the illusion that racial prejudice, both in society and in the church, was a problem that we confronted and conquered in the 1960's. But the problem of racial prejudice is as real and as present as the human propensity

to forget. Only this expression of prejudice is more insidious, in an era of sensitivity to racial issues, because we have discovered more subtle ways of expression and practice. One of these is a renewed and inordinate concern for the various "comfort zones" of people in the church. To anyone who witnessed the racial tensions in churches of the Restoration Movement in the 1960's, this kind of talk is not unfamiliar. One may recall from that period that there were no prejudiced people in the church, only those who were "uncomfortable" with integration. Shades of this same attitude are still present with us in a movement prompted by an important and legitimate concern of all churches, that of church growth. This is a movement which focuses upon the importance of being sensitive to the various "comfort zones" of different people in an attempt to present them with the gospel of Christ. Unfortunately, too often the presentation of the gospel, according to this perspective, has served to reinforce the barriers between people of different races as an effective way of promoting growth rather than dismantling those barriers in the name of Christ.

Several years ago I attended a "Church Growth Seminar" at an exclusively black church which was conducted by a prominent spokesperson for church growth techniques who happened to be white. During an open forum, the question was raised as to whether members of the black churches should invite white people to their worship assemblies or simply refer them to the white church nearby and vice versa. The response of this speaker was that maintaining this principle of homogeneity — black people with black people and white people with white — was the most effective means of promoting the growth of the church, to which everyone, black and white alike, heartily agreed. As an effective principle for increasing numerical growth I was also compelled to agree, but I have since wondered, as I did then, if the end result could properly be identified as the church for which Christ died and Paul proclaimed!

Unfortunately, in our frantic attempts to reverse the trend of declining membership in the church, we have often succumbed to

preaching "another gospel." Note again with me that, for Paul, the gospel is not only proclaimed with words, but with actions also. In fact, as I reflect upon this renewed concern for comfort and compatibility in the church out of a sincere desire for the church to grow and be at peace, I am reminded that even the great encourager, Barnabas, was "carried away" by Peter's hypocrisy. I can just imagine Barnabas taking Paul aside to provide him with the rationale for their modified stance toward Gentiles. Perhaps, he also spoke of "comfort zones" (only in other words) and a desire for edification and peace — concerns that would have resonated with Paul. And yet Paul's decisive and uncompromising response is a stern reminder to us that the concern to be "all things to all people" in an effort to "save some" is a statement about the adaptation of the messenger and not the message, even if the messenger is perceived as an "angel from heaven."

Inclusion "in Christ" is not primarily about our comfort nor our compatibility. Indeed, the

only commonality that is significant for us is our common relationship to God "in Christ" (and therefore to each other). To be "crucified with Christ," for Paul, is the willingness to bear its "marks" and shame and to accept its incompatibility with the status quo. The desire to avoid such subversive, unattractive, implications of the cross of Christ is precisely what Paul attributes to those who preach another gospel (Galatians 6.12). What a tragic irony it would be if the principle of homogeneity, which accepts as normative the barriers between human beings, should replace the gospel which dismantles those barriers through the cross of Christ! The "world" of racial segregation has been crucified to Paul because racial differences are no longer significant in this "new world" (6.15) that is "in Christ."

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## Of What Party Are We?

J. BRUCE KILMER

In 1988 much of the attention of the nation will be focused on the presidential election and its candidates. And one subject that will be getting a lot of the attention is the role of belief and faith in the lives of the candidates and in the governing of our nation. The fact that a TV evangelist is making (made) a serious run for the White House is not the sole reason for this interest in religion and politics. In 1976, with the election of Jimmy Carter, pollsters and politicians began to take seriously the poll-power of a group that came to be defined in many ways: evangelical-right, born-again, moral majority, Christian right, new right, etc.

Soon after Carter took office, many in this group quickly deserted him when they found out that his beliefs were affecting his politics in a way in which they had not expected. Letting his faith inform his politics, Carter spoke of morality and human rights in foreign policy. No longer would the U.S. support an oppressive and abusive dictator just because he was anti-communist. The Third World had to be taken seriously. We could no longer placate the poor with foreign aid. We needed to admit our exploitation of them and realize that it was wrong for Americans to consume a disproportionate amount of the world's resources. Furthermore,

for Carter, the Soviet Union was an enemy that was human, not just the "Evil Empire."

The evangelical-right turned to Ronald Reagan, someone they could support politically even if his expression of Christian ideals was superficial and more influenced by early 20th century capitalism than 1st century apostolic teaching. This may have been all right had the evangelical-right not wedded their faith so closely to one man and one party. But when supporting Reagan and the Republican party became so associated with the Christian message, the cause of Christ suffered.

This year, it seems that many of the evangelical-right equate support of the Republicans (or even of Pat Robertson) with Christian duty and service. Many leaders in the evangelical black churches are pressuring their flock to support Jesse Jackson. Such alliances of Christians, as any alliance other than the one with Jesus Christ, are dangerous and potentially harmful for the Christian message and example to the world.

As Billy Graham learned from his close association with Richard Nixon, the world often confuses the Christian message — and the message itself can become distorted — when it is linked too closely with any person, party, or movement other than the kingdom of God. We must leave ourselves room to criticize the Republicans, the Democrats, Reagan, Carter, Robertson, Jackson, *et al.* and to have a stance which is distinctly Christian.

The man who taught us to feed the poor, heal the sick, and visit those in prison, and to turn the other cheek, must wince when he hears his name linked to a higher GNP, more missiles, and less aid to those in need. Likewise, the man who taught us not to lust, not to hate, and not to divorce must be saddened by those who advocate in his name, or in the name of freedom, homosexual marriage, abortion, and divorce.

The fact is, that none of the parties have a Christian view on all the issues. And none of the candidates, like none of us, will live their lives perfectly consistent with the Christian message. Some of the positions and views of a party or person may coincide with what we believe to be Christ's way, but too close of an

alliance by Christians with any person or any party can lead to the Christian message being distorted, confused, or compromised. That is why the message should not be linked too closely to any party or candidate or preacher. The only person we can focus our message and faith on is Jesus Christ, for only He will never fail us.

Where does that leave us as Christians? Should we not get involved with the politics of our nation or community? Should we be apolitical? I think not. We are to be salt and light and leaven. Unless we are involved, the governing of our nation, state, and communities will not be tempered by the love of Christ. We should get involved. Some of us should run for office. We should vote and support candidates. We should vote for or against someone, based on our Christian beliefs. Our political positions should derive from our Christian principles. However, we should be careful not to link our support and opinions too closely with one person or party, because that person and party will let us down. We must leave room for the message of Christ and the kingdom of God which transcends politics, even as it tempers politics. God's message is not Republican or Democrat, Socialist or Communist, right-wing or left-wing, and He allows us to not be Republicans or Democrats, Americans or Russians, Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.

Let us show the world that our allegiance is to Christ, and that His love through us is for everyone, no matter what party they espouse or from what country they come. Let us be perceived as a "Third Race," as put so well over 1800 years ago in the "Letter to Diognetes":

"The Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. . . They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign

land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. . . They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. . . They are

poor, yet make many rich. . . To sum up all in one word — what the soul is to the body, that are Christians in the world.”

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## Love and Culture

### HOY LEDBETTER

When a friend of mine recently moved to a Pacific island, she had to give up her cherished practice of wearing jeans. She was told that a woman in any kind of pants had a very seductive effect on the men in that society and therefore violated the rules of decent behavior. Since the success of her work depended to a great extent on her acceptance by the people, she had no choice but to conform to local custom, even though the rejected attire was in perfect harmony with the norms of her native culture.

Her situation reflected the fact that in any given society one will find boundaries set and rules adopted, which, since they have the consent of the general public, Christians cannot ignore without alienating themselves from the people they are supposed to win. Whether these rules issue from God's direct revelation or merely reflect the development of local culture, believers are obligated to respect them. Otherwise their behavior will be regarded as disgraceful.

The binding nature of custom lies behind the statement in 1 Corinthians 13:5 that love “does not behave itself unseemly, does not act unbecomingly, is not ill-mannered or rude, has good manners” (to cite a selection of translations). The original verb denotes behavior that

is disgraceful, dishonorable, or indecent, and a review of Old Testament passages in which it is used will cast some light on the Corinthian text.

### Old Testament Illustrations

One of God's rules for priestly propriety in Old Testament worship was: “You shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness [lit. shame = private parts] may not be exposed on it” (Ex. 20:26). Another requirement to the same effect was that the priests should wear linen breeches when they served. The penalty for violation was death, because the place where they ministered was a holy place (Ex. 28:43).

An essential item of military equipment was the spade with which each soldier was required to cover his own excrement, the reason being that “since the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp. . . your camp must be holy; and he must not see anything indecent among you lest he turn away from you” (Dt. 23:14).

These boundaries of decency are very clearly spelled out by God, and they are to be the custom. Whether or not they are supported by local culture is not a question to ask, for God's will has priority over all else. Undoubtedly, divine decision accounts for the stern attitude of Jacob's sons toward the man who raped their

sister: “they were very angry because he had done a disgraceful thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done” (Gen. 34:7).

The basis for judgment is more elusive in Deuteronomy 24:1, the well-known passage which provides for the divorce of a woman who finds no favor in her husband's eyes “because he has found some indecency in her.” But by what standard her husband might credit her with indecency, and what was the precise nature of her behavior, is not stated.

### The Engagement

Moving back to the Corinthian context, we find that when Paul gave special instructions to that church regarding right relationships between the sexes in a time of crisis, he stated two objectives: (1) to promote what is seemly, and (2) to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord (1 Cor. 7:35). An instance of possible unseemly behavior is provided in verse 36, which, as I understand the passage, alludes to a man who has stirred up the sexual desires of his fiancée and yet hesitated to marry her. Paul's direction is that, if he thinks he is “acting unbecomingly” toward her, they should marry, even though marriage in what is called “the present distress” may bring on problems of its own. Arousing the passions of one's beloved and yet refusing to marry constitutes indecent behavior, and love does not behave in such an unseemly way.

### Heads and Hair

Another reference to disgraceful behavior is in 1 Corinthians 11:4-6, where we are told that a man who prays or prophesies with his head covered disgraces his head, whereas a woman who does the same thing with her head uncovered disgraces her head; and also that it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved. And, in verse 16, Paul argues that even nature itself teaches that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace for him.

That the restrictions imposed on corporate worship by these verses are seldom in evidence in our services today shows that we operate under different customs. What, then, does the passage have to say to us? If it is to be inter-

preted in harmony with common contemporary practice, it tells us that standards may vary according to time and place, but those in effect will be respected by all who walk in love. Surely, the problem under discussion here could not have been far from Paul's mind when he asserted that “love does not act unbecomingly.”

### The Lord's Supper

Not far removed from this type of behavior is another which the apostle confronts in the same chapter (using the same Greek verb as in verses 4-5). He asks in 11:22: “What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing?”

This refers to the self-centered attitude with which the Corinthians ate the Lord's Supper, which in fact made it *their own* supper. But no matter what they called it, eating in which the self-seekers caused others to suffer shame was indecent behavior. How strange that a meal intended to celebrate the limitless love of Him who placed his very body at the disposal of others should be used as an occasion to despise and humiliate the very objects of his love! Obviously some of the saints in Corinth needed to learn again that real love “never acts unbecomingly.”

And we today need to understand that Paul's discussion of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11 is an indictment of all who eat without due sensitivity to others, without seeing all of their brothers and sisters as those in whom the Lord is pleased to dwell, without seeing the assembled saints, including those who have not yet arrived, as the legitimate body of Christ. Failure in this regard constitutes behavior so indecent that it incurs severe judgment. The text is a strong warning to shun the very appearance of individualism and party spirit.

### Women and Others

Paul's final references to unbecoming behavior appear also in the context of corporate worship. First he declares that it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church (1 Cor. 14:35). Then he demands that all things be done properly (i.e., decently) and in an orderly manner

(14:40). Thus he provides a corrective to more than one aspect of impropriety within the assembly.

Without getting into the legitimate role of women in worship, we may say that the disorderly deportment of the Corinthian women deserved rebuke under the customs in force then and there, and quite possibly under ours today. But they were not the only ones who needed to keep quiet. Alongside the women were various other participants who did not want to wait their turn, or, as was the case with tongues-speakers, did not want to wait until their gifts could be appropriately shared (i.e., when an interpreter was present).

Decency and order are yoked together. Too many of the Corinthians not only thought they had something to say, but also thought they had to say it. In a selfish exhibition of gifts that overpriced the so-called "gift of gab" and refused to give first place to the edification of the whole body, they demonstrated that their actions did not come from a love which "does not act unbecomingly."

It was just as important for the Corinthians to behave decently and in order in church as it was for the Old Testament soldiers to carry a spade, and for the same reason. That God

walks in the midst of his people makes it imperative that they should always be holy — that he should not see anything indecent among them — lest he should turn away from them. So it is also vital that he see nothing in his church that he would deem improper.

Whenever we are tempted to ignore the needs and desires of our fellow-worshippers, when we become so absorbed in using our own gift that we fail to see that its usefulness in the service is nothing but to edify others, when we tend to make our "less presentable" brothers and sisters feel embarrassed by our thoughtlessness or haughtiness (which may pose as spirituality), or when our enthusiasm (or self-assertion) pushes us beyond the boundaries of good taste (as defined by prevailing custom), let us remember that what we are engaged in is not Spirit-filled worship. It is indecency. It is self-seeking. It is a repudiation of God who walks among us. It is the very opposite of love, which "does not behave itself unseemly."

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Hoy was founding editor and editor-in-chief of *Integrity* for 15 years. He and his family presently serve at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Albany, Georgia.

## A Call to Christian Skepticism

DON CRAWFORD

In Acts 19:11-20 is the extraordinary account of the ministry of Paul at Ephesus. In verses 11-12 we see Paul healing the sick through merely touching handkerchiefs and aprons which were then carried to the sick. Some of the Jewish exorcists, when they saw this, decided to pick up on a good thing and attempted to use the name of Jesus to cast out evil spirits. In verse 15, an evil spirit whom they were attempting to exorcise answered them, "Jesus I

know, and Paul I know, but who are you?" The possessed man then leapt upon the exorcists and beat them to a pulp, until they finally broke away, wounded and naked. Not surprisingly, the news of this event quickly spread throughout the city until all were filled with fear and extolled the name of the Lord Jesus. Then in verses 18-20, Luke tells us:

"Many also of those who were not believers came, confessing and divulg-

ing their practices. And a number of those who practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all; and they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily."

The men and women of the Hellenistic world had inner needs which could not be met by a purely material approach to life. Their faith in the mythical religions of their culture had been lost. But there was still a longing in them for something beyond this world which was expressed in a searching for something new. This was the occasion for the popularity of the magicians of Ephesus.

### Searching for Spirit

Materialism, an approach to life which says that physical reality is all there is, *always* fails to meet the inner spiritual needs of man. This is the need of which Jesus spoke when he said, "I am the bread of life" and "I am the living water." This searching evidenced in the Ephesians is seen in contemporary secular societies' fascination with the occult, extremist cults, eastern mysticism and pantheism, parapsychology, trans-channels, "after-death" experiences, *et. al.*

The difficulty for secular man is that he has a longing for some spiritual experience which would speak to his inner being, but his naturalistic world view precludes any intelligible basis for choosing from among claims to such experience. So, if in his longing for some spiritual element, he steps into the spiritual sphere, he becomes completely vulnerable to liars and charlatans who would prey upon him for their own gain. Charles Fair addressed this vulnerability in western culture in his book, *The New Nonsense*, as does James Randi in *Flim Flam*. Fair and Randi point out with dismay the return in our society of belief in phenomena which modern man long ago rejected as superstition. We see all around us a fascination with horoscopes; biorhythms; devil's triangles; extra-terrestrial involvement in the pyramids, the Nazca lines, and Stonehenge; mediums from the spirit world; out-of-body experiences; ad

infinitem. Furthermore, the loss of modern man's ability to discriminate is also seen in the growing cynicism about the ability of scientific investigation to accomplish anything. For instance, there is a growing skepticism about statistics which we hear expressed at almost every turn: "you can prove anything with statistics." Of course, that is true if you don't know what you are doing, or if your audience does not know what they are doing. But the cavalier rejection of any discipline of knowledge merely because it is susceptible to abuse would very rapidly have us back to the level of savages. In a fallen world, reason is subject to misuse just as is every other capacity. The question is not whether a capability is vulnerable to misuse, but whether, when properly applied, the capability can be useful in helping man cope with a fallen world.

It is in this social morass of uncertainty about how to discriminate between the true and the false that Christians find ourselves with information about how to choose between faiths, information for which many hunger and many others have given up hope. The danger which the Christian community faces in the midst of a secular world which has spiritual hungers is, that rather than providing this information, we will add to the confusion by becoming proponents of spiritual naivete.

### Reason Helps Spiritual Discernment

This danger is due to the fact that we realize human thought alone can never lead us to a knowledge of God, a knowledge for which we are dependent upon God's choice in history to reveal himself to us. Unfortunately, we often confuse our need for revelation with an affirmation that human reason is of no use whatsoever. Of course, human reason cannot replace revelation. But if human reason cannot help us discriminate between the multitude of claims concerning spiritual phenomena, then we are just as much in the dark as we were before God revealed Himself. To move increasingly away from any effort to do critical thinking is to move ourselves toward the abyss of darkness; it is to remove the human from man and turn him into

a beast who responds solely on the basis of impulse and instinct. It is not enough to believe truth. We must refuse to believe untruth. To believe that which is true necessitates that we reject that which is false. This requires discrimination. The rejection of reason destroys any hope we have of discriminating between true and false claims as to the presence and work of God.

Sadly, skepticism about reason itself can make us resemble the Ephesians who in their longing for some spiritual experience had followed exorcists and magicians. We can become so enamored with the spiritual realm, so hungry for spiritual phenomenon, that we become spiritually gullible. We can rebound from a secularism which denies all spiritual phenomenon, no matter the amount of evidence, to a spiritualism which accepts all spiritual phenomenon no matter how skimpy the evidence. We then leave ourselves wide open to being knocked around and stripped naked by the demoniac. *Accepting any spiritual claim is not being spiritual in any Biblical sense.* We should be those who are as wise as serpents, but as innocent as doves.

A while back, a "prophet" appeared at my office. He asked for food and clothing, which, along with a bath, he obviously needed. We gave him what he requested, while he told us of how God had been revealing a prophecy to him for several years, a prophecy which he was to pass on to the church. He had completed the prophecy, which he showed us in a suitcase covered with mildew and filled with about 2000 yellowed, loose-leaf pages. He told us how church after church in southern California had turned him away, but that the church desperately needed to heed this word from God which he called his "oracles." He wanted to leave the 2000 pages with me for me to read in the next 24 hours, and then he would return to pick them up. I explained that I had two problems with his offer: (1) the Lord had told his people to meet the needs of others and to minister to others. This prophet's life-style of asking for help from others rather than getting a job to support himself, while he preached his message, seemed to run counter to the image of Christ

to which Paul called us to confirm in Phil. 2:1-11. (2) I was already as busy as I possibly could be doing what I knew God had told me to do with my time and energy: serving my fellow men and women. Therefore, I didn't have a lot of time to read 2000 page latter-day oracles. However, I told him if he would tell me one prophecy, *when it was fulfilled*, I would *immediately* sit down and read his "oracles" with a great deal of attentiveness.

At this point, he told me he would consider giving me such a prophecy, and would return the next day. However, the next day he returned not with a prophecy, but with an anger at me and everyone else around for not believing his revelation from the Lord. God would judge us for our unbelief, we were told. When he became physically abusive about our unbelief, the police had to be summoned.

### Faith in the Right Man

Was I unbelieving? You bet! The thing I tried to explain to him when he accused me of unbelief, was that I never claimed to believe in him. My faith was not in this man. *And my faith was not, and still is not, in faith.* My faith is in Jesus Christ. My faith in Christ has no necessary relationship to the trustworthiness of this man and his claims. Nor does my faith in Christ have any necessary relationship to claims concerning the spiritual realm. The fact that I believe in Christ in no way makes it more likely that I should believe in this supposed prophet than that Madalyn Murray O'Hair should believe in him. It is not the case that the apostles became apostles and believers because they had a prior disposition toward belief. As a matter of fact, a good argument could be made that one thing which made them quality material for witnesses of the Lord is that they had less of an inclination to believe in claims of Messiahship than did a large number of their contemporaries. And it is clear that subsequent to their realization of the significance of Christ, they had much more resistance to claims of revelation posted by adversaries, gnostics, and mystics than did their contemporaries. Faith is not naivete, gullibility, or credulity. Rather, it is a trust relationship with Christ who is

trustworthy. His trustworthiness does not automatically imply anything about the trustworthiness of anyone else. It just makes me less desperate to find someone else in whom to believe.

The tragedy is that sometimes the world looks at Christians, and sees in us a faith that is expressed as gullibility. I fear that many secular people refuse to believe, not because their hearts are hardened, but because they are sensible enough to refuse to suspend their ability to discern and discriminate; something we have led them to believe faith would require them to do.

### Faith in Images

Maybe you read recently of the image of Jesus Christ and a small child appearing on the side of a soybean oil tank in Fostoria, Ohio. Each night, hundreds would gather to see the image which appears only at night. Or perhaps you remember the excitement some time ago over the Lady of Guadalupe, the image of the mother of Jesus which inexplicably would appear some evenings on the side of a church building in Guadalupe, Mexico. It was said that if one observed her appearance, one would be healed of infirmities and diseases. Thus, many traveled from all over the Americas to Guadalupe in the hope of being healed of a multitude of infirmities. Do you know why you haven't heard of this divine apparition of late? The city of Guadalupe put up street lights. That's right, street lights! They put up street lights, and the shadows which made possible this apparition were dispelled. And what of the Jesus and child on the soybean oil tank in Ohio? A former firefighter was so angered at the traffic jams that he threw paint-filled balloons at the tank, obliterating the image. The power of God is overwhelming isn't it? Overcome by paint-filled balloons, and tungsten and electricity! Should we now worship electricity? Am I being irreverent? I think not nearly so much as those who reverence as God any occurrence which is attributed to God. To reverence everything, including golden calves and bumps in the night, is to reverence nothing.

A more recent example is the Shroud of

Turin. We who believe in Jesus must be careful about embracing the claims concerning the Shroud simply because we would like for them to be true. There is much cause to be skeptical. Time may prove those claims unquestionably wrong. We do not want to tie belief in God too closely to phenomenon which are less reliable than the evidence He has provided for Himself in history. That only serves to weaken His credibility before the world.

This is the trouble with gullibility. When we buy into claims of spiritual phenomena without any real evaluation of the substance of the claims, we make our God a clown and laughing stock before the world. If the world is to laugh at Christ, it should be on account of His cross, not because of the inane claims we make in His name.

### Skepticism vs. Gullibility

Is what I am saying dangerous in that it will lead to a kind of skepticism and questioning that will keep men away from God? I would much rather deal with an honest, skeptical man than a gullible one. I use the qualifier "honest" because skepticism can be the excuse of a man who refuses to reason. But a man who is honest in his skepticism is much less dangerous than a man so gullible he will believe any claim. When I deal with a skeptical man, I can at least use reason to show him the fallacious assumptions upon which he builds his life. In talking to a completely gullible man, I have no means to get him to evaluate his fallacious assumptions. He has thrown all ability to discriminate out the window. Reason is the wind which separates the chaff from the grain. Gullibility is to take the wind away, to eat from the granary stock that which has not been to the threshing floor, believing it is ok because anything from the grain fields is bound to be ok.

### Faith in God, Who is Spirit

Our faith is not in the spiritual realm, but in God who has worked and is working in our behalf. We do not believe there is a God because we believe in the spiritual realm. Rather, we believe there is a spiritual realm because we believe in God who is Spirit. We

believe in Him not because we are naive. We believe in Him because of the extensive historical testimony concerning Himself which He has provided us. The thing that distinguishes our faith from belief in Baal, Ashtaroth, Buddha, or Kali is that He has given signs and testimony of Himself in his actions in historical contexts which were observed by historical witnesses. This testimony can be examined critically. This is what separates His claims from the claims of deity of every other world religion. Faith in Him is not credulity. Ultimately, faith in every other god is based upon credulity.

There are two songs the church frequently sings. The first is "He Lives," which has a message that is disturbing if understood in a certain light. In the refrain, we sing, "You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart." Is that the case? If our experience is the validation of our faith, then Christianity has the same validation as every other world religion. Furthermore, the validation is meaningless, for to believe anything intently enough, whether Puff the Magic Dragon, the tooth fairy, or Santa, leads to an experience of heart. This says nothing about the validity of those beliefs, only that we believe them enough to have feeling responses to them. Of course, when we properly understand this song, we mean what Paul means when he speaks of the spirit crying out with our spirit, saying "Abba, Father." (Rom. 8) Paul in that passage is not speaking to nonbelievers of the validation of faith. He is not speaking to Christians of how the veracity of our faith was confirmed when we first came to belief. Rather, he is speaking of the experience in the inner recesses of our hearts, now that we are God's children, by which our relationship with our loving Father is affirmed. We must distinguish between verification and affirmation when we speak of the Spirit's testimony within.

The second song, "Our God, He is Alive," more accurately describes the biblical reality of faith when it says, "There is beyond the azure blue, a God concealed from human sight, He tinted skies with heav'nly hue and framed the worlds with His great might." Yes, He is.

And He was. He existed before the creation, and He made it all. He exists apart from any man's experience of Him, and He existed before any existed to have an experience of Him. His reality is not contingent upon any human ever having an experience of Him, and all men draw their existence from Him whether or not they ever realize it. When a man becomes aware of the external reality of God, such awareness causes the thrill in that man's heart. The reality of God is the course of our heart's response to Him, and not vice versa.

### Be a Spiritual Skeptic

All the foregoing implies at least three things for disciples today. The first one is that we must understand that we are called to be spiritual skeptics. In Jer. 14:14-16 God told Jeremiah there are those who claim to be prophets who lie. The punishment under the old covenant was that both those who made false spiritual claims and those who believed them were to be put to death. Gullibility in spiritual matters was not a commendable form of "faith" or of being "super-spiritual".

But how shall we recognize those who make false claims? There are two standards: Notice first in Deut. 13:1-5 that if one makes a prophecy which contradicts God's established word, he is to be put to death *even if* what he prophesies should come to pass. This death penalty which was to be carried out by Israel was a "purging of the evil" from among them. Now notice Deut. 18:18-22. The second standard for recognizing a prophet is that what he prophesies should come true. If it does not, again the penalty is death.

Of course, the New Testament is full of warnings of false teachers. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount tells us, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." Of course a false prophet, one who is lying in his spiritual claims, dresses "in sheep's clothing." Are we so naive as to believe that the false prophet, the one who lies in making claims in the spiritual arena, will of necessity seem insincere? Are those who would delude us for their personal gain unable to feign sincerity? If that were the case, God

could have told Israel in Deuteronomy, "If one comes to you with a prophecy, and he seems insincere to you, stone him, but if upon careful examination, he convinces you of his sincerity, then listen to his message." And yet, many times I see Christians responding to all kinds of claims by "sincere brothers" as if the claims just had to be true. The only way a wolf can destroy the whole herd is by convincingly appearing to be like a sheep.

### Know God's Word

Secondly, not only are Christians called to be spiritual skeptics, but we must understand that the only safe way to be a spiritual skeptic is to know the Word of God! There is no other safe foundation from which to examine critically the claims made in the spiritual arena. In Acts 17:11, the Bereans were commended as noble because they were skeptical enough *about the apostles' teaching* to check it out in scripture. Paul admonishes Timothy in II Tim. 2:15 to study in order to show himself approved by rightly handling the word. If we really want to be able to measure the claims made all around us about spiritual phenomenon, we need to be students who live in and feast upon His word.

### Christ Meets Our Needs

Thirdly, our age's fascination with spiritual phenomena calls each one of us to ask ourselves whether or not we trust Christ and rest in His grace. In Eph. 1:3 we learn that He has blessed us with *every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*. He is the food we eat, the water we drink, the source of our nourishment. Are we hungry? We shall fill ourselves with His Spirit. Are we anxious? We shall trust Him. Are we frightened of the demons around us? We as His brothers shall call upon His name.

The key question is: have we really seen

Him? Do we really abide in Him? If so, all other phenomena lose their glory in contrast to Him. He is the pearl of great price for which we sell all as mere pebbles in order that we might have the true treasure beyond measure. Thus Peter, when he finally comes to understand the Lord, relinquishes his ambition of a physical military empire for Israel and follows his Lord to a cross. Thus the magicians of Ephesus gave up their way of life and livelihood, burning their bridges and books behind them. They saw something which gave them no pause to reserve an avenue for retreat. If I truly grasp who He is, all my inner needs for spiritual truth and filling *have been met* by Him. Thus the predominance of the perfect tense in the New Testament references to the work of Christ. All that needed to be done for my inner life *has been accomplished* in His life, death, and resurrection. It is an accomplished reality lacking nothing except my acceptance of it. Christ cries out from the cross across the ages, "It is finished." Are we Christians or spiritualists? My confidence is in Him, not in the spiritual domain. I trust Him. There is much in the spiritual realm including the father of lies which I greatly distrust. I examine everything in the spiritual arena with care, knowing in Him I have already found all I need. If he desires to give me something new on which to hold, it will stand the test of a critical eye, and I will know it is of Him. But I ask for nothing more, and I look at the latest claims without longing for them to be true. For He has already given me all I need. And He has already provided sufficient testimony for the world to examine and to come to know that He is.

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*He who walks in integrity walks securely.*

Prov. 10:9