

# Integrity

JULY 1975  
Volume 7 Number 2

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8494 Bush Hill Court  
Grand Blanc, Michigan 48439

Nonprofit Organization  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
Flint, Michigan 48501  
Permit No. 239

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## Faith Expansion

A New York reader recently wrote: "I am certain that a very large number have had their minds expanded thanks to your efforts. Unfortunately *mind* expansion has limited value. *Faith* expansion is what the church of Christ really needs." No doubt our friend has made a valid point. We may assume that by "faith expansion" he means a fuller realization of losing our lives for His sake—a genuine commitment rather than a nodding assent to the propriety of believing—and that "mind expansion" refers to light shed by discussions of internal affairs.

Unfortunately the real battles of life are not fought over the issues that so often attract our journalistic talents. This is not to say that our debates should end. But little issues must not be allowed to distract us from the big ones. Even if the church is as corrupt as some imagine, we have more to do than argue with each other generation after generation. Exorcism may be a valid ministry, but the kingdom of God does not consist in casting out demons. If the temple must not be a den of thieves, it certainly must be a place where man and God come together. Is it worth the effort to evict the thieves only to turn His sanctuary into a conference room where we can carry on our discussions with scholarly detachment? As far as the practice of faith is concerned, many of us—we admit with shame—never get beyond "almost persuaded." We fail to fully accept or positively respond to the gospel. As my wife puts it, "Instead of doing, we don't."

Faith implies more than just maintain-

ing an optimistic outlook in the face of frustration. It involves an element of aggressiveness which is richly illustrated in the examples of faith in Hebrews 11: Noah "constructed an ark," Abraham "went out" and subsequently "offered up Isaac," Moses "left Egypt," and others "conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight." There seems to be a widespread longing for this sort of faith today, but how can it be produced?

There is no better solution than doing what the writer of Hebrews did—bringing before people who have lost their excitement for Christian living a cloud of witnesses who can testify about their faith. But such a presentation involves more than rehashing heroic stories. This enlightened generation requires an intelligent communication of the possibilities of faith for those who are caught up in a feeling of *remoteness* from the central characters of their religious heritage. We must show such people how to realize Biblical faith with all of its aggressiveness.

We face no greater danger today than that of losing our sense of commitment. Like the wandering Israelites, many of us may know where we have come from, but we are not sure where we are going. As Moses soon learned, leading God's people is not always an easy chore, but if some are to perish in the wilderness, we can at least make sure it is because of their own recalcitrance rather than a lack of guidance.

—HGL

## Ecstasy at Colossae

DAVID F. GRAF

THE INTERPRETER of the ancient text must in a sense be a modern detective, attempting to discover any clues which might help elucidate the meaning of a passage. His problem is complicated in the study of Colossians by the presence of an unusual number of words which occur nowhere else in the New Testament—34 in only 95 verses. There are also some 28 which are unique to Paul.

This has been taken as evidence that the Colossian letter is not genuine. However, it should be noticed that 16 of the hapax legomena and 11 of the words peculiar to Paul appear in the discussion of the heresy (2:8-23). Hence it is reasonable to assume, as Eduard Lohse suggests, that the "opponents' catchwords" and "slogans" have been interwoven into the refutation of the "philosophy" (2:8). Unfortunately, ancient writers did not use quotation marks, and the proponents of the heresy have not left us any treatise explaining their beliefs. The reconstruction of the situation of the church must remain dependent to a great extent on the Colossian letter alone.

### Assumptions . . .

Since the time of Tertullian in the third century the traditional interpretation of the "Colossian heresy" has been to associate it with the Jewish-Gentile conflict that characterizes much of Paul's other writings. The assumption that the setting for the epistle is the typical legalistic controversy regarding the Law of

Moses is supported by the Jewish terminology that appears in the discussion of the heresy—"circumcision" (2:11), "new moon" and "sabbath" (2:16). However, it should be observed that the word for "law" (*nomos*) never appears in the Greek text (cf. *The Jerusalem Bible* translation of 2:14)! Also absent are the characteristic terms of Pauline theology when dealing with legalism—righteousness and justification by faith. Finally, the definition of the heresy as "human traditions" (2:8) and "human precepts and doctrines" (2:22) should dispel any facile identification of the heretics as mere "Judaizers." Such a conception of the Law of Moses is hardly compatible with the elevated and lofty position of the Jewish Scripture found elsewhere in Paul's writings.

The emphasis in the letter of such motifs as "fulness," "body," "wisdom," "knowledge," and "philosophy" has led to the suggestion that an early form of Gnostic thought was inherent in the heresy. If the "elemental spirits of the universe" (2:8), "the principalities and powers" (2:15) and the "worship of angels" (2:18) can be equated, it would appear that there is a cosmic dimension to the heretical system. The stringent ascetic regulations imposed by the opponents appear to have been an effort to demonstrate subservience to such heavenly powers and win their approval (2:20-23).

With the discovery in 1945 of a Gnostic library at Nag Hamadi in Egypt and in 1947 of the writings of a Jewish sect at

Qumran near the Dead Sea, it has become popular to identify the heresy at Colossae as "Jewish Gnosticism." For example, G. Bornkamm has said, "of the fact that behind the Colossian heresy there stands a Jewish or Judaistic Gnosis, strongly infected by Iranian ideas, there can scarcely be any doubt."

There is also a great deal of evidence for the existence of Jews in Phrygia, where Colossae was located (cf. Acts 2:10). At the close of the third century B.C., Antiochus the Great had settled more than 2,000 Mesopotamian Jewish families in Phrygia and Lydia as an effort to stabilize the rebellious natives (Josephus, *Antiq.*, xii.3.4). Their inscriptions and references to them in Roman literature indicate that they had prominent and sizeable communities at Laodicea, Apameia and Acmonia. It is to be noted that they had a notorious reputation for deviation from orthodox Judaism and assimilation of pagan culture. This would help explain the non-Jewish elements that characterize the Colossian heresy. What is problematic is the chronological lateness of the Gnostic texts (second century) and the lack of proximity and significance of Qumran for distant Colossae.

### Phrygian Frenzy . . .

The neglected aspect in most reconstructions of the background of Colossians is the role native Phrygian influences may have played in the development of the heresy. The heathen past of the letter's recipients is explicitly mentioned: "you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind" (1:21), and "dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh" (2:13). In fact, in my opinion it is this indigenous cultural milieu that provides us with the best evidence for an understanding of the "philosophy" that Paul was combatting in Colossians.

Colossae is located in the Lycus valley, along with its nearby neighbors of Laodicea and Hierapolis, both of which are mentioned in the Colossian letter (4:13). It is Hierapolis which is important for our understanding of local Phrygian culture. Its name ("Holy City") is derived from a religious cult devoted to the worship of the Great Mother goddess Cybele, which was located around a cave where a cleft in the earth emitted lethal vapors. The eunuch priests of Cybele were alone immune to the noxious fumes which, after they had been inhaled, filled them with ecstatic prophecies. This all took place just 10 miles west of Colossae and 6 miles north of Laodicea.

Neither was this an isolated cult. There were many seats of Cybele's worship throughout Phrygia, and it was from her chief sanctuary at Pessinus in Galatia near the borders of Phrygia that her worship was transported to Rome in 204 B.C. Characteristic of the cult were *ecstatic states of prophetic rapture and insensibility to physical pain*. Her worshippers gathered to the sound of exotic instruments—flutes, tambourines, cymbals and horns—for their wild dances by which they worked themselves into a state of frenzy that culminated in self-scourging, self-laceration, and even self-emasculatation. It was by this release from the bonds of the material and the flesh that they established an emotional communion with the goddess.

### An Endemic Disease in Phrygia . . .

The clearest evidence of the influence that the Phrygian cult had on Christianity comes from the emergence of Montanism in the second century. In 172 a former priest of Cybele named Montanus became a convert to Christianity and immediately began to speak in prophetic ecstasy with

the claim that he was the promised Paraclete. He was joined by two female attendants, Maximilla and Prisca, who left their husbands for a life as prophetesses of the sect. Dissolutions of marriages and laws on fasting were characteristic of the movement, along with the belief that the movement would reach its climax with the descent of the New Jerusalem in the countryside of Pepuza, just 40 miles north of Colossae and about 5 miles from Montanus' home at Ardabu.

The connections of such a sect with the Colossian heresy might at first be thought to be highly, if not grossly, speculative. However, there is substantial reason to believe that Phrygian Christianity had always been characterized by prophetic ecstasy, rigid asceticism and millennial hopes. The chiliast Papias (d. 165) was Bishop of Hierapolis, where tradition said Philip and his four prophetess daughters once resided and were buried (cf. Acts 21:8-9). The Montanists themselves honored an earlier prophetess of Philadelphia in Lydia. As Cumont has commented, "violent ecstasy was almost an endemic disease in Phrygia."

### Analysis of Texts . . .

We can now begin to analyze the tenets of the "philosophy" which the churches in the Lycus valley encountered, viewing the catchwords and slogans of the opponents from the background and perspective of the indigenous or native social-religious milieu.

See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ (2:8).

The phrase "elements of the universe" (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*) is disputed. C.F.D. Moule takes it in the sense of

"elementary teaching," on the order of the ABC's, and denoting the "materialistic" nature of the heresy. G. Delling takes it as a cosmological expression for the elements that compose the universe (*TWNT*, VII, 684). However, the context seems to contradict any impersonal interpretation of the phrase. It seems best to take it with Lohse as an astrological term for the cosmic principalities and powers (2:15) and the angels who are worshipped (2:18).

Astrological symbolism and star-worship also had considerable influence on the Phrygian cult. Cybele was said to preside over the movement of the stars and is frequently pictured with her cloak spread out in a semi-circle to resemble the canopy of heaven. The dance of her devotees around the altar symbolized the movement of the stars, and Phrygian augurs gained a reputation for their expertise in the "ways of the constellations" (Juvenal, *Satires*, VI, 585). There is no reason to think that the opponents of Paul could not have shared similar skills and beliefs derived from native piety.

Why do you submit to regulations, "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (referring to things which all perish as they are used), according to human precepts and doctrines? (2:20-22).

The rigid ascetic tendencies of the heresy are revealed by their strong prohibitions concerning fasting and abstinence. It is possible that "handle" (*haptesthai*) has to do with sexual abstinence as in 1 Cor. 7:1, but the object is not given. It is clear that "food and drink" were involved. The observance of sacred times—"festival or a new moon or a sabbath"—appears to have been a part of the "regulations" (*dogmata*) imposed by the "elements of the universe," who controlled the move-

ments of the stars (2:16). This is not necessarily evidence that the heretics were Jews, since pagans could and did borrow freely from Jewish traditions, which already had associated such days with the stars.

In preparation for the spring festival, the worshippers of Cybele spent a whole week in fastings and purifications. They practiced sexual continence and abstained from bread, certain fruits (quince, pomegranates, dates), meats (fish and pork) and wine. Then on March 24th they gathered for the "Day of Blood" in which after wild dancing and music they gashed their bodies with potsherds, slashed them with knives or scourges of knucklebones. It is not difficult to conceive of such practices as the source for the Colossian heresy's "regulations" and tendency toward "severity to the body" (2:23).

It is possible that Paul's discussion of the "circumcision of Christ" (2:11) is an attack on the depreciation of the flesh by the heresy. The suggestion is that it is not by "regulations" that the Christian overcomes the flesh, but rather by his identification in baptism with the Incarnation and Cross of Jesus, where the fleshly nature of all humanity was stripped away and the heavenly powers brought into submission (2:15). If this is the case, circumcision serves as a symbol for the crucifixion and baptism.

**(God) cancelled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross (2:14).**

This has commonly been taken to mean that the Law of Moses was abolished on the cross, but this view fails to take seriously either the context or the phrase involved (*to kata hēmōn cheirographon tois dogmasin*). The "bond" (*cheirographon*) is literally a personal handwritten

statement of indebtedness made by the debtor *himself*. This meaning is given in Philemon 19—a personal I.O.U. Thus Moule has suggested that the essential thought can be rendered as a universal note of debt by all humanity: "I owe God obedience to his will. Signed, Mankind."

It is interesting that the cult of Cybele provides us with a background for such a personal autograph which condemns the signatory. Confessional stele were erected by the devotees of the cult who failed to observe completely the rigorous standards of ritual purity and received punishment subsequently from the goddess for their violation. The stele served both as a warning and an encouragement for others to keep the regulations. It is such obligatory debts which are abolished in 2:14. The phrase "legal demands" (*tois dogmasin*) is best understood as the regulations from which the debt arose.

**Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, taking his stand on visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind (2:18).**

The discussion so far has indicated that there is substantial reason to view the Colossian heresy from the background of local Phrygian culture. What remains is evidence for ecstatic prophecy at Colossae.

Moule has observed that "there is practically nothing in this epistle about the Holy Spirit." The adjective "spiritual" (*pneumatikos*) appears in 1:9 and 3:16, and in 2:5 the "spirit" of Paul is contrasted with his "flesh," but the only possible reference to the Holy Spirit is 1:8 ("your love in the Spirit"). However, the article is missing in the Greek text (*tēn humōn agapēn en pneumatī*), so it could be taken in the adjectival sense of "spiritual love." This does not have to be the

case, but there appears to be an attempt to tone down the role of the Holy Spirit.

This does not constitute an objection to the view that ecstatic prophecy was an element of the Colossian heresy (the absence of the "Law of Moses" in the letter has not served as an obstacle to the view that the opponents of Paul are Judaizers). It may in fact be an indication that "enthusiasm" was a problem for the church. This is indicated by the phrase "taking his stand on visions" (*ha heoraken embateuōn*) which appears to have been an emphasis of the adherents of the philosophy.

This is an admittedly difficult phrase. The verb *embateuein* occurs only here in the New Testament, but it is a technical term in Roman times for the initiation rites of the mystery religion. At the sanctuary of Apollos at Claros near Colophon in Asia Minor it is regularly used for the act of communication with the god at his sacred site. Thus the phrase is translated by Lohse "as he has had visions of them during the mystery rites." Many manuscripts introduce a negation at this point (cf. KJV) in an effort to deny real visionary experiences to the heretics. However, Paul does not reject the possibility that pagans as well as heretics might experience ecstasy and visions: "You know that when you were heathen, you were led astray to dumb idols, however you may have been moved" (1 Cor. 12:2). In commenting on this verse, Hans Conzelmann observes that "ecstasy alone is no criterion for the working of the Spirit, but itself requires such a criterion." This is precisely the point in Colossians. The focus is not the phenomena as such, but the pride produced by the experience and the imposition of it on others.

In the rites of Cybele asceticism and fasting were used to induce this state of ecstasy. It has parallels elsewhere. In

*The Bacchae* (468-9) of Euripides, Pentheus asks Dionysus, "How did you see Zeus? In a dream or face to face?" Dionysus responds by saying "face to face" or literally "eye to eye" (*horōn horonta*). The Colossian heresy also has its focus on encountering the divine in real religious experience. It is difficult not to believe that the sign of this meeting of the human and divine was that of the Phrygian culture, i.e., ecstasy, and that it was induced by the "regulations" and "severity of the flesh" that Paul condemns.

### Some Practical Questions . . .

These comments may not be felt to have been persuasive, but it will not have been the first time there was disagreement over the interpretation of a text. It will be enough if the convictions expressed are generally conceded to be not unfounded. However, my intention was not only to convince the reader, but to suggest that if this discussion is correct, it has a great deal of practical value for questions concerning the charismatic movement today.

It is popular in some circles to deride and deny the validity of glossolalia. This is not Paul's approach or belief, even among a heretical sect. The certainty that the age of the supernatural is over and that God is limited to performing his redemptive activity only according to our presuppositions and prejudices may be comforting, but it is hardly Biblical. The God of the Christian faith is not subject to our manipulation or limited by our ability to comprehend his majestic nature. Judgments about how freely and in what manner others feel he may reveal himself should remain private and subject to revision. The complexity of the ecstatic experience, as revealed by the many volumes of psychological, sociological and theological analyses of the phenomenon,

indicate that it is a subject that must be regarded with humility and openness.

This same humility should characterize the adherents of the charismatic movement. The witnessing of charismatics within the Christian community often leaves the impression that non-tonguespeakers are sub-Christian, inferior and incomplete. It was such pride as this that was condemned in the Colossian letter. The arrogance and in-groupiness of such an attitude places great pressure on those who are outsiders to the experience but are Christian believers. It is possible for the visionary experience to be induced artificially or manufactured, according to Paul, but this is hardly desirable or theologically defensible. Along these lines, the warm but earnest plea made by Hoy Ledbetter in a previous issue (April, 1975) needs to be thoughtfully considered by all tongues-speakers.

Meanwhile, let us give God thanks for all our dear friends who have managed to

incorporate their charismatic gift into their Christian experience and maintain their humility. Walter Wink put it well when he recently said: "It's not how ecstatic one is, but the way the Spirit gets worked into the warp and woof of one's life, which is the criterion of whether or not the experience has been creative or disintegrative."

Finally, the treatment of the Colossian heresy by Paul helps us determine what is of priority in defining our existence as Christians. It is his firm conviction that the reception of visions or tongues must remain secondary and extraneous to the initial experience of baptism when the Christian was united with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus his Lord. The resurrection of the believer is a fact already accomplished (2:12). The source of his identity is found not in the sublime moments of ecstasy which subsequently may or may not follow, but in the events of Golgotha outside of Jerusalem.

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#### Some Thoughts on Personal Spiritual Growth

## "Every Man Perfect in Christ"

JOSEPH F. JONES

While some social anthropologists have recently been negatively critical of what they characterize as "the myth of maturity," the Scriptures affirm growth and maturity as essential dimensions of the Christian life. Jesus identified the goal of living in the Kingdom to be "perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Numerous are the exhortations in the New Testament to become, to realize spiritual progress, to attain Christ-likeness (Eph. 4:11-16), to have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5); and the apostle Paul asserted that the end of his labor and striving was to "present every man perfect in Christ" (Col. 1:28-29). Although the ultimate destiny of the believer is the eternal presence of God, the end or goal toward which daily life in the Kingdom is oriented is Christian maturity (Heb. 6:1-4).

No attempt can be made here to explore in depth the background and meaning of the word (*teleios*) from which we get our English terms "perfection" or "maturity"; but it can be affirmed that in New Testament thought and usage *teleios* often means "totality," "wholeness," "completion" (*TDNT*, VIII, 73-77). The one whose intention is to be pure in heart (Matt. 5:8), undivided in commitment, is moving toward a wholeness of life in his relationship with God. "Being whole" manifests itself in concrete behavior toward God and men, undivided in

one's loving intent to effect the well-being of another. Since God's will and nature are absolutely pure, undivided in willing the good of man, Jesus could make this the goal of our behavior: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Let your attitude toward the good and welfare of others be a pure, undivided intention, and you will be moving in maturity (wholeness) to God-likeness. What an exhilarating goal for which to strive in Christian life, and what personal inner satisfactions come to the one who is growing in "wholeness, completeness, perfection"!

Sometimes the concept of perfection points toward process, that movement from incompleteness to completeness, to wholeness, and actualization. So the Hebrew writer exhorts believers to grow from the limited, incomplete nature characteristic of the newborn believer to maturity or wholeness in his commitment to God, in fuller grasp of God's truth in Christ (Heb. 5:14-6:1); and this growth in maturity or wholeness brings the power of moral discernment, with the ability to judge between good and evil. How desperately we need such maturity, and its moral effect in our behavior toward others!

God wills, then, and provides the spiritual dynamic for us to become whole, complete, more totally committed to

knowing and doing his will. Toward this objective in each believer's life we ought to direct our various ministries. Let us not fear or be apprehensive that when the goal of spiritual growth and maturity is held before us that we are being asked to attain on our own some unreachable moral or ethical perfectionism. This is not what God is asking; it is not what Jesus taught, nor his apostles.

Christian maturity is not some nebulous notion about which Christians only

talk, but an actualizing of a more total commitment to Jesus as Savior and Lord. Paradoxically enough, Christian maturity may lead one to realize even more sharply the distance between himself and God on the one hand, while assuring that God not only holds before us realistic goals but provides the source and strength to experience them. Augustine well grasped this idea when praying, "Command, O Lord, what Thou wilt; then give what Thou dost command."

# The Idea of the Stumbling Block

## PART ONE: THE OFFENSE AND CHRIST

CRAIG M. WATTS

The Lord of Hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary, and a stone of offense, and a rock of stumbling. . . . And many shall stumble thereon; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.  
—Isaiah 8:13-15.

The concept of the stumbling block is consistently negative. William Barclay points out that "the word *skandalon* has two ideas behind it. It means either a 'stumbling-block,' something set in a man's path to trip him up, or 'a snare,' 'a bait,' 'a lure' to entice him astray and so to ruin him" (*New Testament Words*, p. 256). It is doubtful that the word is ever used literally in the New Testament, but whether literal or figurative, the thought constantly conveyed is that of hurt, hindrance and possible destruction. This thought is maintained when the word is used in reference to Jesus and later when it is found in the apostolic letters to the church.

Perhaps a good point within the Scriptures to begin this study is 1 Cor. 1:22, 23: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles." Christ was a stumbling block in more than one way even before he was crucified. In his character, his message and his saving activity on the cross he was an offense to many.

The Jews, like most religious groups, had their spiritual stereotypes. Certain external forms were expected to be conformed to, and if an individual failed to measure up, he was viewed as less than spiritual. Jesus didn't appear to be overly

concerned about these stereotypes. Not that he was against them; he simply didn't go out of his way to meet their pseudo-spiritual standards.

### Jesus' Radical Life . . .

Jesus lived in such a way that his very existence proclaimed the sacredness of every area of life. He said of himself that "the Son of man came eating and drinking" (Lk. 7:34). It is notable that his first miracle was not in the solemn atmosphere of the temple or synagogue, but in the joyful surroundings of a wedding feast. He knew that the spiritual life was not to be set in contrast to the rest of one's life. Many of the Pharisees could not appreciate this fact.

The ease with which Jesus was able to receive sinners also caused a problem for the religious leaders. They saw radical separation from sinners as a mark of purity, but our Lord demonstrated that concern and sacrificial involvement are the real mark of true spirituality. This was too much for those who prided themselves in being "the chosen." They stumbled at his life style and bitterly murmured, "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Lk. 15:2).

God cannot and will not be limited by our definitions of him, and this can equally be said of the Son. He will never fit into a man-made box, and those who expect him to are set for a fall. "Blessed is he who takes no offense in me."

We must not impose our preconceptions on God, and dictate to Him the terms on which He may have recognition from us. This always implies the risk that we may stumble at what He actually does—refuse to recognize Him in Jesus because the manifestation does not square with our demands (*Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, II, 260). This was a problem of many of his contemporaries, as well as many of our own.

Just as the life style of the Lord was a cause of offense for many, so also were his teachings. Jesus often spoke in terms which clashed with traditional understanding. Many today tend to believe he lacked tact in much of his teaching. Just when he started drawing large crowds, he in essence drove them away by making such strange and radical statements as, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you have no life in you" (Jn. 6:53). Generally people today are as perplexed about these words as were those present when Jesus first delivered them. It is understandable that "after this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (vs. 66). Even his closest followers were in such a state that the Lord asked them, "Do you take offense at this?" (vs. 62).

Other of Jesus' teachings had a similar effect on the listeners. In response to certain traditions he said, "Hear and understand: not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." Then his disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" (Mt. 15:10-12). It was no surprise that his teaching was a stumbling block to those who were so comfortable with the familiar and were resistant to new insights.

The basic situation and attitudes among religious people are much the same now as they were then. I remember several years ago in a Bible class being asked a question concerning a topic which I viewed differently from most. I answered the question as honestly as I could. It caused a small stir, and immediately afterwards I was cornered by an elder who was obviously upset and emotional. "Don't you know you could cause someone to stumble answering like that?" he exclaimed. I couldn't help thinking that if

someone's faith could be shaken by simply hearing an alternative viewpoint of a peripheral issue, it would not be my fault at all, but the blame would be with those who had provided such poor, off-centered teaching to begin with. Jesus constantly had to deal with such situations.

### The Crucial Cross . . .

The most important manner in which Jesus becomes a stumbling block is in the cross. The Jews were utterly repelled at the very thought of a crucified Messiah. So it is in the cross that Jesus most thoroughly failed to live up to the expectations of the people. They were confident in their knowledge of the Scriptures and their interpretation of prophetic messages, so confident, in fact, that they were blinded to the acts and wonders of God. Instead of a triumphant kingly leader leading Israel to victory against Rome, the Messiah comes only to be rejected by his own and hung between thieves.

This fact of the cross could not be ignored or smoothed over in apostolic preaching in order to make the Christian message more pleasing to the ear. The story of the cross is that of a God who acts in the unexpected in order to receive the unaccepted. Only through divine weakness could this divine power be demonstrated. As James Moffatt has said,

It was only a stumbling-block for those who refused to see that in the history of Jesus the final and saving revelation of God was enshrined, as well as already predicted in the sacred Book, and realized through the working of the divine Spirit on earth. . . . Staggering as it might be, the story of the cross had to be proclaimed to all and sundry, if the power of God was to come effectively into play (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 17).

Under the image of a stone, a dual picture is drawn in 1 Peter 2:4-8. On the one hand Jesus is set forth as the "living

stone" and "the cornerstone"; on the other he is seen as "a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall." He is either a blessing or a curse, the cause of stability or of downfall.

Unbelievers find, on the one hand, that the Stone which they reject is made the keystone of the divine order of human society, from which they are therefore excluded as long as they persist in their unbelief; and on the other hand, that the same Stone is an insuperable obstacle to their efforts at building an order of their own devising without it. There is a superficial difficulty in the double thought of the Stone as at one and the same time fixed in place in the building for those that accept it, and yet lying in the path of those that reject it (F.W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 99).

Christ must be dealt with; he is too great to be neglected. He must either be the cornerstone and foundation of all life, or, if rejected, the "rock of offense" for all who seek to make their way through life without him.

Not only was the fact of the crucified Messiah offensive, but the purpose and result of the cross—salvation by faith—stood as a roadblock against those who would seek God through works of law. In Galatians Paul confronted the Judaizers who, though advocating not a wholesale rejection of Jesus, sought to nullify his work on the cross by bringing in works of law into the realm of justification. Circumcision was the symbol of their legalism. But Paul recognized that no aspect of law can be required for salvation without every part of law likewise being required, and so he exclaimed, "I testify to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law" (Gal. 5:3). To accept circumcision would be to accept the whole legalistic scheme.

Though obviously the legalism Paul deals with in Galatians is rooted in the Mosaic law, the principles involved are far

broader in application. Many contemporary legalistic approaches fall under his condemnation as well. Jesus did not come to be a law giver; he came as a grace bearer. This is the true offensiveness of the work of Christ. Human effort and pride do not have even the smallest place in the scheme of salvation. As Paul said elsewhere, "He saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (Tit. 3:5).

To adopt legalism in any form is to repudiate Christ. Many recognize that the possibility of salvation solely by works is absurd, but what they fail to see is that to claim one can be saved by grace *and* by works is even more absurd. It is, in fact, contradictory. The two methods of obtaining righteousness are totally incompatible. Grace by definition is unmerited favor. On the other hand, obedience of law always implies merit (Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 4:4). The impossibility is evident.

For one to be saved by grace *and* works he would have to merit unmerited favor! But this illogical view is held by many today, despite Paul's joyful message: "Now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law . . . the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Rom. 3:21-22). A compromise with legalism would remove "the stumbling block of the cross" (Gal. 5:11), but this must never be done. This stumbling block for human pride and self-centeredness must remain.

Actually almost anything in Christ may become a ground of stumbling—the demands of discipleship, the radical shift in values required, the paradoxical elements of his teaching, his judgment of our downfalls—all provide opportunities for offense; that is the nature of the situation. But wherever stumbling is possible, growth in grace and blessings is even more possible. It all depends on how we choose to respond to him—as a stumbling stone or the cornerstone of all things.

## Has the Church Gone AWOL?

KAREN LEDBETTER

There are many sources which point to an increase in religiosity in America in the past two decades. Statistics on church attendance and membership, contributions to churches, and investment in church buildings have evidenced a remarkable growth in the ritual aspect of religion. Also, investigations of the proportion of people holding certain religious beliefs and religion's influence in the mass media

have shown an increase in religious belief. At least this was the case up until 1958.

Charles Glock and Rodney Stark, in *Religion and Society in Tension*, have charted a post-war increase in religious participation which occurred between 1940 and the late 1950's. Statistics show this post-war increase to be part of an overall trend upward. For instance, whereas church membership in 1890 was

at 22% of the population, it progressively increased, from 43% in 1920, to 57% in 1950, and reached 63.6% in 1960. But since a decline in membership began in 1959, we need to inquire into the nature of religion in America.

### Christianity Sold Here . . .

According to Glock and Stark, factors which helped to sustain the period of increase included the need for third-generation immigrants to obtain a form of identity (which the church assisted them in doing) and the state of animosity created by the cold war. But they also claim that there have been two important changes in the character of American religion. The first is a decline in doctrinal rigidity; that is, churches have become more inclined to accept or at least to tolerate each other. There has been a tendency toward unity of outlook and growing hopes for ecumenicalism. Secondly, the church now plays a proportionately smaller role in certain aspects of American life than in the past.

Will Herberg, author of *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, attributes the trend toward unity to a common element of American religions, which he refers to as "the American Way of Life" (which, incidentally, can be abbreviated AWOL). This, Herberg believes, is the true religion of Americans, and they are intolerant of views which are in conflict with it. It is their operative faith, and is more influential in their lives than any single religion.

The American Way of Life stresses such values as self-reliance, achievement, individuality (though this seems to be narrowly defined by many), pragmatism, thrift, and democracy. It tends to be middle-class and inner-directed. Thus historical religions have become Americanized and secularized, and adherence to

certain beliefs is less important to the churches than ethical behavior and what Americans define as the "good" life. Herberg points out that this is a faith in faith itself, and a worship of worship itself.

Another view of the current state of American religion is provided by Peter Berger in *The Sacred Canopy*. Although he does not emphasize a common element upon which American religions are based, he does agree with the idea that American religion has become secularized. Berger defines "secularization" as "the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols." He claims that the influence of secularization has caused religion to lose its place as a virtually unchallenged way of defining reality. The individual now finds several structures for defining reality vying for his allegiance, whereas formerly religion provided meaning, definitions, and direction for him. In view of this development, since the state does not give support to a dominant religious institution, churches have come to compete with each other and with other institutions for allegiance of individuals. As a result, religion has become a "product" to be "sold" in a market situation.

A perfect illustration of this condition is the following advertisement encouraging church attendance which appeared in a mass-circulation magazine and which sounds like an advertisement for any other product on the market:

Sure you vote, pay taxes, work hard, make money, and have made out a will. But you must do something more to become a first-class citizen. You must experience the benefits that come from going to church regularly. Your children will respect you more. Your neighbor will look up not just across to you. Your community will recognize you as a participant, not just a passerby. Your country will be stronger, for you will en-

force that spiritual fabric so essential to its continuing welfare. But the person who will benefit most is you. You will get the stimulation and reward of understanding the brotherhood of man, the dignity that the individual can derive from worship. You will equip yourself to cope with all the complications that eternally face us all. You will make the other 167 hours each week truly worth living. See for yourself—next Sunday.

Thus these authors see trends in religion toward secularization, ecumenicity, tolerance, and even commercialization. Some see American religion as having a common underlying element which is made up of middle-class values. They have also seen religion as a rising phenomenon in society. However, in the past few years, according to a few more recent sources, church attendance and similar forms of religious expression have decreased. A survey by the New York Archdiocese showed a 23% drop in attendance at Sunday mass over the past five years. Likewise, a drop in church attendance for the thirteenth straight year was reported by the Gallup Poll in 1971, when 40% of adults were attending church on a typical Sunday. This poll revealed that the largest decline occurred among Roman Catholics. According to these figures, the year 1958 seems to have been the peak year for church attendance—when the long-lasting upward trend began to reverse itself.

*Psychology Today* found in its own study of religion in 1973 that 53% of Americans still identify with one of the main groups: Protestant, Catholic, or Jew. It appears that many hold on to traditional beliefs without attending church regularly, and there is a definite defection from the orthodox church. At the same time interest in the supernatural has risen, and many people report contemplating the problems and questions of existence.

Perhaps these last two findings are correlated. It is obvious that many Ameri-

cans, particularly youth, cannot find what they need in the churches. Although they are seeking ways to define reality and to provide meaning for their lives, they are not finding churches helpful in their search. Perhaps this is the result of the secularization and commercialization of churches. American churches have become so bent on increasing attendance and being popular that they have become almost totally supportive of the status quo and the middle-class and have often played down the sacred element and the high ideals and values of Christianity.

### Remember Him? . . .

This attitude hardly reflects the non-materialistic, revolutionary, and deeply individual teaching of Jesus. The love, understanding, and compassion which he demonstrated have somehow been replaced in many churches by obsession with externals, such as one's appearance and the length of his hair, and with internal wars over such foolish issues as instrumental music in worship.

I do not promote intolerance among churches, but believe, rather, that tolerance should be based on a common goal instead of on eliminating all strong and important issues from the sphere of religion (which would make it unpopular with some). The church must ignore externals and less important features of the individual and, by showing Christ's love and compassion, help people to succeed in their search for meaning and to deal with the turmoil of life. In short, the church must ignore the popular standing of middle-class America and return to its original foundation—the revolutionary teachings and the loving example of Christ during his life on earth. Only in this way will the church once again become relevant to the entire lives of the American people.