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Thy Kingdom Come

INTRODUCTION

Why study Church History? Why not just forget about the past and pursue a better course in the future? After all, there’s really no need to raise old issues or open old wounds, stirring up the muck of past events, personalities, and institutions. I suppose the cliché of being doomed to repeat our mistakes comes to mind, but does such a sentiment have a place in a Kingdom ruled by God, and guided by His Spirit? The Church is much like a foundry in which fine steel is purified and forged into weapons and tools capable of sustained usefulness to their maker. In God’s foundry, there are no unnecessary events, personalities, or institutions. Each one achieves his purposes, and refines his people. The only question before us is how best to use the information of the past to achieve God’s purposes today.

The course is divided into 300-year segments. Each segment contains information about the major personalities, events, and concepts that shaped that period and in turn were shaped by it. While some bias exists in the selection of the sources and content, I tried to pick sources that are balanced and Biblical. I chose the people, ideas, and events that I felt most influenced the development of discipline in the Church. That’s the focus of the course. Some assert that without discipline there can be no church. It might also be asserted that without orthodoxy there can be no discipline, because there can be no heresy. And yet it was the exercise of discipline in the church that led to some of its cruelest and bloodiest conflicts. That leads to the central question of this course: should discipline be more concerned with theology (orthodoxy), or behavior (orthopraxis)? Does history show an unholy alliance between church and state that pushes doctrine over practice, damaging the Church’s reputation and causing harm to its people?

The analysis of this course is primarily drawn from Jeremy Jackson’s book *No Other Foundation* about which Francis Schaeffer writes,

This is the finest book available on church history. It is faithful to the facts of history. But it goes beyond cold facts to uncover the meaning of the past for today, in light of Christian truth. I hope this becomes a standard evangelical work --- in colleges and seminaries, but also in homes of everyday Christians.

This course is intended to challenge you, to motivate you, and to encourage you to build on the foundation laid down by Jesus Christ. We walk in the paths he walked, and we pursue the life he

asks of us. This is a “meat” course. It focuses on obedience and action. We have been called to the *obedience* of faith, not to faith alone (Rm.1:5; Jm.2:26). We’ll be discussing some practical applications of our lessons each week. The examples and experiences of our forefathers in New and Old Testaments, as well as history, are available to guide and encourage us.¹ Some of the examples are negative ones, and this may stimulate some lively discussions. We won’t avoid controversy for the sake of unity if it is at the expense of an honest and open examination of our heritage. Feel free to share your views. Do not feel free to impose them on others.²

A Church, A Church, My Kingdom for A Church

The Kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned, then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn’ (Mat.13:24-30).

The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear (Mat.13:37-43 NIV)

Kingdom? What Kingdom?

When I first decided to do this course, I mentioned it to a non-Christian friend at work. His initial response was interesting: “The history of which church?” Shall we study the Catholics or the Protestants, the True and Invisible church or the Sunday morning Social Club? By what standard will we measure the experience of our foregone brothers and sisters so we may learn from their experience? How do we know if what they did was right or wrong? Just what do we mean by the term “church?” I believe Jesus’ parable of the wheat and the weeds quoted above is a depiction of the church as it exists in the world. It illustrates the difficulty of deciding who among us is a true believer and who is a mimic. God forbids second-guessing His election of another to His Kingdom, or judging the eternal condition of our brothers and sisters in the faith. Does that effectively destroy our ability to exercise discipline within the Body?

Let’s look a little closer at that word “weed” Jesus uses in the parable quoted above. The closest word we can find in today’s language is probably darnel, which is called *zowan* by present-day Palestinians. It bears some resemblance to the original Greek word *zizania*. It looks in every way like true wheat. Even an expert cannot distinguish the two until they produce their fruit; then anyone can tell them apart. The fruit of the darnel is not as heavy or as compact as the

¹ 1Cor. 10:6-11

² 1Cor.6:12, 10:23 All things are permissible – not all things are beneficial. All things are permissible – not all things are constructive.

wheat. It is poisonous to both man and beast, producing nausea and giddiness.³ William Arnot, a Reformed pastor of the last century, is vehement in his opposition to the use of this parable to describe the church. He points out that Jesus himself gave the answer to what the field was: the world and not the church. And yet Jesus tells us that in the world we are like yeast sifted through flour; or again he says, the kingdom is like good fish and bad both drawn into the kingdom's net (Mat.13:33,47). Anthony Hoekema writes,

In searching for the central meaning of the kingdom, the first question to be settled is whether the kingdom stands for a realm or territory over which God rules or for the reign or rule of God as such. The most widely accepted understanding of the kingdom of God is that its primary meaning is the rule or reign of God rather than a territory over which he rules...

The kingdom must not be understood as merely the salvation of certain individuals or even as the reign of God in the hearts of his people; it means nothing less than the reign of God over his entire created universe...

The kingdom is established by God's sovereign grace, and its blessings are to be received as gifts of that grace. Man's duty is not to bring the kingdom into existence, but to enter into it by faith, and to pray that he may be enabled more and more to submit himself to the beneficent rule of God in every area of his life.⁴

So we cannot say, "Here is the kingdom" or "there is the kingdom," nor can we say, "here is the church, and there it is not." We cannot wall ourselves in with ecclesiastical boundaries. We cannot be effective in the Great Commission by insulating ourselves from the world. This commingling of saved and unsaved within the walls of the Church provides an insight into the historical aberrations of the social institution known as the church. A book titled "People of the Lie"⁵ contends that evil people feel compelled to appear normal and righteous to maintain their self-esteem. They mingle with God's people to remove the stigma of their own sinfulness. They become part of the lie of an unproductive Christian life. They walk and talk and act just like the real thing, but they have no peace, no purpose, no joy, and no fulfillment. It has also been true that when the church provides a path to power in society, it makes itself an unwitting weapon in the hands of unscrupulous people. And that is where the reputation of the Church became sullied over the years leading to bloody Crusades and Inquisitions. God's kingdom by contrast is apolitical. It exercises dominion over the heart, soul and mind of its people, not civil government.

Who Belongs to this Kingdom?

Discipline: the Root of Discipleship

If the church has invisible boundaries known only to God, and if the darnel is not to be pulled out of the field where it grows alongside the wheat, does that mean there can be no discipline within the church? No! Absolutely not. And this is why: to the extent that wheat remains true to its nature, or darnel remains true to its apparent nature, it doesn't need to be corrected. The two grow and develop identically until the harvest. Then the two may be rightly divided. They are either gathered into the barn or burned by those appointed to do so. The two

³ Arnot, William *Parables of Our Lord* (Kregel, Grand Rapids, 1981), p. 78.

⁴ Hoekema, Anthony, *The Bible and the Future* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1979), pp.44-45.

⁵ Peck, M. Scott *The People of the Lie* (Touchstone NYC, 1983).

appear as one when they stand in the field. To the casual observer, the mixed field is uniform. Both crops testify of their wheat-like nature right up to the Harvest.

But there are other weeds in the field that definitely need to be removed. They do not remain true to the nature and appearance of wheat. Such weeds cripple the wheat and even the dandelion. They draw away nourishment from each. They testify to their own corrupt nature. They produce a confused and haphazard appearance where a groomed and nurtured crop should stand. Perhaps a parasite would provide a better analogy. A parasite which afflicts the well-being of the farmer's wheat must likewise be removed, at once. Removal is a corrective action particularly suited to these ailments. But what if the wheat itself becomes bent or partially withered. Do we likewise remove it? Do we rip it out by its roots and leave barren soil behind to be infilled by thorns and wild vines? Or rather, do we irrigate it with water, feed it, and stake it upright to keep it growing full and straight?

The discipline described by Paul is like that applied to the bent stalk of wheat. It is restorative. It is discipline which rebukes the offender, separates him from the fellowship of the Body, and then draws him back into fellowship when he has shown the fruits of repentance. The goal is to build him up and not cast him out. However, this does not address the problem of the thistles and parasites in the crop. There is no correction that will ever convert these pests into a crop of wheat. So these are two very different afflictions within the church, and they require very different remedies. Please do not confuse this with an attack on the behavior of those who are not and do not claim to be under the Lordship of Christ. Paul says very clearly in 1 Cor. 5:12, "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church. Are you not to judge those inside?"

To put the question in more concrete terms, "Are we obligated by Scripture, or even by the laws of men, to put up with cursing, adultery, incest, molestation, robbery, murder, seduction of minors, or flagrant violations of personal integrity and mutual respect?" Of course not! But at what point do we draw the line and exclude someone from the Body of Christ by a formal act of excommunication, or by refusing the person communion with the Body, or even by denying admission to the church entirely? This becomes all the more difficult to decide because there is no hierarchy of sin. At what point do we call the police and hand over sinners to civil authority against their impenitent will? The standard we apply here cannot be an arbitrary one. Nor can it rest on the application of a laundry list of forbidden activities. The standard of discipline in the church, as well as the standard of God's Judgment, is not the nature of the sin itself. It is the willingness of the sinner to repent from actions which violate the clear teachings of God's Word.

Why do I even raise the issue of proper church discipline in a history course? First of all, because the history of the church is the history of its obedience to Christ. Obedience necessarily means the application of both internal and external discipline to produce such obedience. Secondly, I raise it because the misapplied church discipline has been the primary complaint of those who oppose the church based on its violation of human rights by disciplinary tribunals. They could rightly point to church discipline which was used to oppress those who truly served Christ. They could rightly point to church discipline which failed to punish those who slandered the name of Christ with their hypocrisy and disrepute, those who have been Christian in name

only.⁶ And in this way, the misapplication of church discipline has undermined the effectiveness of church missions, and it has refuted the testimony of church witnesses.

Church discipline led to the early rifts in church unity called “schisms.” Church discipline led to the infamous Inquisitions. Church discipline led to the witch hunts of Salem. Yet church discipline also led to the creeds, the confessions, and the Reformation. Unless we understand the role of discipline, and learn to distinguish between separation and insulation from the world, we cannot appreciate the people, events, and circumstances which have led to the church as we know it today. It is a standard by which we can contrast the Bride of Christ with adulterous and worldly institutions which may call themselves a church, but whose behavior suggests a different parentage (Jn. 8:42-44).

The Church as Witness

The Church’s Marks of Distinction

Now let’s try to get a handle on this corporate entity known as the church, or the Bride of Christ. What are we referring to when we use the term “church?” The definitions which follow are austere but the words have been carefully chosen and deserve our close attention.

The biblical word for “church” in the Old Testament is *mi’qara* (OT:4744 a convocation or summoning together), or *qahal* (OT:6951 an assembly). The New Testament word is *ecclesia*, meaning those who are called. Both convey the idea of an assembly called by God. It can refer to a local church body, whether or not assembled for worship (Act.5:11,11:26; Rom.16:4; Cor.11:8,16:1); it can refer to a gathering in someone’s home (Rom.16:5,23; 1Cor.16:19; Col.4:15); it can even refer to the total body of believers whether in heaven or on earth (Eph.1:22,3:10,21,5:23; Col.1:18, 24).

Roman Catholics and Protestants disagree on the essential nature of the church. It is important to look at this parting of the ways to understand why the split occurred in the church during the Reformation and why it remains to this day. The Roman Catholics tend to refer to the church as the external and visible organization of the *clergy*. Protestants refer to its essence as the invisible and spiritual communion of *saints*, or true believers of all ages; they are united in the Spiritual Body of Jesus Christ. As such, the Protestants’ definition of “the church” excludes non-believers who may attend the gathering of the believers. The Catholic definition excludes the laity. Later on we’ll see why this dividing line was necessary in the church’s development.

There are three distinctions which apply to the term “church” when it is used in everyday speech and each has its own dynamic at work:

1. The Church Militant vs. The Church Triumphant - The Church Militant is the church on earth as it is engaged in a holy war. The Church Triumphant is the church as it exists in heaven: the sword has been exchanged for the palm of victory.

2. The Visible vs. The Invisible Church - The church on earth is invisible as far as her spiritual

⁶ Consider the pedophilia abuses by Catholic priests in the 1990’s that were known but undisciplined.

nature is concerned. Therefore, it is impossible to determine who does or does not belong to her. The church becomes visible, however, in the profession and conduct of her members, in the administration of the Word and the Sacraments, and in her external organization and government.

3. The church as an organism vs. the church as an institution - This description of the church as an organism naturally applies only to the visible church as the communal relationship of believers in distinction from their relation to the world. It describes the church as a body which is not limited to the sum of its members at any given time (which is what an institution is). Rather it is a body which continues on through changes in membership, changes in practice, and changes in generations of participants. Its identity is therefore distinct from any one member, or even any combination of members.

The Church Defined

INVISIBLE CHURCH - the company of the elect who are called by the Spirit God. We might say this group is established by the Witness of the Heart.

VISIBLE CHURCH - the community of those who profess the true faith, together with their children. We might say this is established by the Witness of the Tongue, accompanied by the Evidence of our Deeds.

What then distinguishes a church in its outward appearance from any other religious or secular body? This question leads us to other Catholic-Protestant distinctions.

CATHOLIC view of the Church -

1. The unity of a world-wide organization.
2. The holiness of its dogmas, moral precepts, worship and discipline.
3. The catholicity of its outreach based on the number of its members worldwide.

PROTESTANT view of the Church -

1. The unity of the Spiritual Body of Christ.
2. The holiness of its members as holy in Christ and holy in principle; they have received new life and are destined for perfect holiness in heaven.
3. The catholicity of its membership, which includes all those who have believed in all ages and all lands.

The Church's Activities in the World

1. *The true preaching of the Word of God*, i.e. preaching which is true to the fundamentals of Christianity, and which has a controlling influence on both faith and practice (1Jn.4:1-3; 2Jn.9). We'll examine just what these fundamentals include shortly.

2. *The right administration of its sacraments*, i.e. they are consistent with the Word, performed by lawful ministers of the Word, given only to believers and their seed (Mat.28:19; Mk.16:16; Ac.2:42; 1Cor.11:23-30). Limiting the administration of the sacraments to “lawful ministers” is subtle, but the verses in Acts and 1Corinthians refer to those who pass on what they received (a succession of teaching is passed from one group or generation to the next).

3. *The faithful exercise of discipline*, i.e. discipline is mandated by Scripture to maintain purity of doctrine and the holiness of the Sacraments (Mat.18:18; 1Cor.5:1-5,13; 14:33,40; Rev 2:14,15, 20).⁷

The Church’s Mission: What does it do?

The church really has only two functions *within* the corporate Body:

1. WORSHIP - this is corporate fellowship with each other and with the Lord for the express purposes of hearing His Word and praising His Name with song and thanksgiving (Ps.100; Mic.4:2; Mat.18:20; Lk.24:32; 1Co.1:9; 1Jn.1:3).

2. DISCIPLESHIP - The church is the vehicle by which the Faith is propagated. What was taught to the Apostles was entrusted to others capable of passing it on unaltered to all who would follow the Lord. This teaching and discipling was not the passing on of mere doctrine and law, but the demonstration of doctrine and law through personal example. It was not passing down to inferiors the rules of behavior as if a chain of command were in operation, but a mutual and collaborative teaching through each member’s gifts. “Teach and admonish one another” (Col.3:16). “Submit yourselves one to another” (Eph.5:21).

No one was to be above another, but all were to be equal brothers in the Lord, calling no one Father, and no one Teacher but the Christ. The one who would lead would do so from in front, as by example, not from above. This may be carried too far as with Congregational churches, or substantially ignored as with Episcopal and Catholic churches. For discipleship see also Mat.23:8-12; Jn.13:34,35;14:23; Rom.15:14; Eph.4:11-16; 2Tim.2:2,24-26; Tit.2; 2Jn.9,10.

Outside the corporate fellowship, as we become yeast sifted through the flour of the world, church members translate these two basic functions into two related activities:

1. SERVICE - Living out the faith which has been given to us by the Grace of God through serving our neighbors as Christ came to serve the will of the Father by serving us. This is our daily and even our minute to minute worship of the Father, both inside and outside the Body. We make no distinction in the places of our service. We love our enemies as well as our brothers.

2. EVANGELISM - The proclamation of the Good News so that we may bring the external call of the Father to all He has prepared beforehand. If we have not been obedient in our walk with Jesus, then we make a lie of the proclamation. We bring the name of the Lord into contempt in the eyes of the world (Rom. 2:24). The success of our discipleship determines the success of our

⁷ Berkhof, L. *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1983), pp. 151-153.

outreach. We make no distinction between those we call. We evangelize the lost, not just seekers.

You may be expecting a treatment of church structure at this point but it will not be coming. What little we know of early church structure does not come from doctrinal mandates or points of ecclesiastical law, but from the natural outworking of the relationships described in the New Testament. The Bible is not a handbook of Church Order, or a textbook of Philosophy. It is not an exposition of Law, or a description of Religion per se. It is a letter of Love from God Almighty to His chosen people, telling them how to properly understand their relationship to each other and to Him. If our hearts are right with God and with each other, then the formality of church structure will be a side issue. The structure of the church in the third and fourth centuries was little different than the church which soon followed, and which distorted the Truth of God's Word for personal gain. It was the attitude of the church which would change, not its outward appearance. Because no structure is specified apart from a rule of elders and a distribution of gifts, I will leave the analysis of church structure to history itself as we explore the subtle changes which permitted a monolithic hierarchy to substitute its own law for God's.

The Church's Testimony: What does it have to say?

First, let's examine the content of the Gospel. It should distinguish Christianity from all other religions and cults, and define orthodoxy within the Body. Then we can proceed to examine history with this Gospel as our template to help us understand all those confusing heresies strewn about the historical landscape. It's tempting to over-explain and over-define the Gospel message until the average listener says to himself, "This is too technical and too hard to understand." That's the heritage left by the Christian theologians of the last century. They tried to justify Christianity to secular scholars who scoffed at the Gospel's lack of scientific merit and proof. Christianity is as deep as the mind of God, and yet it can be easily grasped by a child.

Gospel Fundamentals

Paul puts the Gospel in a nutshell in 1st Corinthians 15:3-8, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep."

Paul emphasizes the fulfillment of God's promises in the Scriptures, and the fact that there is eye-witness testimony to Christ's resurrection. These two crucial aspects remain in every Gospel presentation today. Our testimony of a changed (resurrected) life confirms the fact that we enjoy new life because Christ lives. This conviction of what we know to be true in our own life is still the key to successful evangelism. Anything less is hearsay and will not be believed. Obedience born of this conviction produces fruit because it reflects God's Truth in a tangible

way that others can see and experience. To this living testimony we must add a clear statement of the Gospel, such as this one used by Evangelism Explosion III⁸:

1. Heaven is a free gift which cannot be earned or deserved.
2. Man is a sinner who cannot save himself from sin's penalty.
3. God is loving and merciful. He doesn't want to punish us, but God is also just. To uphold his holy law, he must punish sin with death, which is sin's penalty.
4. This presents a dilemma, which is answered in the person of Jesus Christ, the infinite God-man. He was without sin. He died on the cross to pay the debt we owe to the Father for our sins and to purchase a place for us in heaven.
5. We may receive this gift by saving faith. Saving faith means trusting in Jesus alone for our salvation, and resting on what he has done, rather than relying on what we have done.

Current Gospel Trends

As clear as this may seem, it uses Christian jargon. It has technical words and phrases that are unknown to the average listener today. Paul's statement that what happened was "according to the Scriptures" assumes that the hearers know those Scriptures. But today, they may not know there is a God, what the Bible is, who Jesus is, what sin means, where "Law" comes from, or why it would apply to them. They may doubt absolute truth, universal law, a living and personal God, a sentient Creator, eternal life, the idea of sin and salvation, objective morality, or any number of things that were taken for granted only a century ago. The phrase "according to the Scriptures" that Paul uses is probably nonsense to them. They suspect we are coming to them with an irrational myth that may be helpful to *us* to cope with an increasingly complex world, but it is irrelevant to *them*. It is all a neatly wrapped package of superstition and irrationalism, as far as they are concerned.

But we aren't talking about the challenges of apologetics here. We're talking about what we are presenting to the world as truth. We're talking about what the church understands that truth to be. Within the walls of the church today, there is lively disagreement as to the content of the gospel, and the reliability of the Bible. There are challenges to doctrine, in which Paul is said to present a different gospel than what Jesus presented. The proliferation of bible translations for commercial profit has cast doubt on the content of God's word. The doctrinal chaos created by the Scofield Reference bible in 1909 has been replicated many times over with dozens of competing theologies today. Some of our most conservative seminaries are preaching a different gospel today than what the church has traditionally preached. Churches have become so fond of growth, that they have compromised the gospel for fear of offending those who attend. We are now a group of politically savvy, market-based, consumer-oriented, vendors of personal growth.⁹

⁸ Kennedy, D. James, *Evangelism Explosion*, (Tyndale House Publishers; 4th edition, July, 2002)

⁹ See *No Place for Truth*, or *God in the Wasteland* both by David Wells; *Truth Decay* by Douglas Groothuis; *Beyond Culture Wars* by Michael Horton;

It is a shame that I have to define to the church the gospel to which I subscribe. It is even worse that by doing so, I separate myself from much of the evangelical community. The history of the church, and of its theology, is the history of the struggle to maintain doctrinal purity, and visible obedience. That is why church history is the story of church discipline. Many churches today have abandoned the creeds and confessions, calling them “divisive.” I suspect they are called divisive because they declare orthodoxy. And by declaring orthodoxy, they define heresy. It may be that some of those who oppose creeds are preaching another gospel, and do not want to be called to account for it. They reject the idea that they are subject to church discipline, and so they place themselves outside the church, outside its orthodoxy, and outside the bounds of the historic faith.

Clarifying the Gospel

We first ask the question “Is there an eternal, infinite, superior, sentient, and personal being?” One way to answer this question is to ask another: “Where did the physical world come from? Who created all this?” Is there any evidence that reveals it was intentionally designed, rather than being spawned out of nothing and then randomly evolved? Some say that the interdependency, intricacy, beauty, and vastness are sufficient in themselves to justify belief in a Creator.¹⁰ That is called *general* revelation. It means that this Being has revealed something of himself in the way that he constructed it all. Others say that the universe itself is an eternal organism. It has always been, and will always be. Matter and energy may transform from one to the other, but they cannot be destroyed. There is no consciousness or intentionality behind it all, however. There is only the fact and existence of it. Still others say, there may be a creative mind behind it, but whatever that mind may be, it is not concerned or involved with us. There is no personality. It is a mere force or collection of physical laws to which we are bound. We are just another life-form, a particular manifestation of matter and energy, without purpose or meaning.

To determine which of these is accurate, or the Truth, we’re going to need more than our experience. We’re going to need *specific* revelation from this Force or Being. Has this entity revealed what he is like, or what he expects of us? For Christians, the answer is a definite, “Yes!” He has revealed many things about himself in a book called the Bible. This book is the foundation of the Christian faith. Without it, there is no Christianity. Perhaps that’s why the text of it is being attacked today. The Bible is foundational because we cannot know God, his character, or our relationship to him without it. The Bible contains God’s own words recorded by a number of authors (called prophets) over thousands of years,¹¹ as they were led to write by the Spirit of God.¹²

OK. Let’s assume that’s true. What makes it different than any other “holy” writ or inspired writing, such as the Upanishads, the Koran, or even Star Wars? What certifies it as the words of the one true God? Here we find the uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth, who was a living man, a historical figure. He claimed to be the Son of God, that is, an incarnation of God, a visible representation of him.¹³ He asserted that the Bible of the Hebrews is true and accurate.¹⁴ If he

¹⁰ Rom. 1:20

¹¹ Rom. 1:2

¹² 2Pet. 1:21

¹³ Mk. 14:61; Jn. 10:30

was who he claimed to be, then that settles it, because he is the author.¹⁵ So the only remaining question is whether he was indeed who he claimed to be.¹⁶ His miracles, and the historical fact that he rose from the dead, are the only proof we have of his identity.¹⁷ On the other hand, if there were no miracles, or if he wasn't physically resurrected from the dead, then of all men, Christians are the most pitiful of fools.¹⁸

Assuming that the Bible is the word of God, and that it is true, what does it have to say about God and our relationship to him? First, it declares there is a God. He is the only God. He is the Creator of the Universe and sustainer of life. He is sentient, personal, infinite, eternal, sovereign, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, and omni-present. He knows each one of us personally. He created us individually. The world, and the universe, its perfection, size, power, and intricacy, testify to his existence.

The Bible has an Old Testament (OT), and a New Testament (NT). In the Bible we discover the expectations God has for us: his law. Its essentials are known as the Ten Commandments. These commandments are divided into two groups, or two tablets. The first tablet governs our relationship with God. The second tablet governs our relationship with each other.

There are moral people in the world, nice people, kind people, *good* people. They obey the second tablet without even thinking about it. The Bible says that God has written his law on their hearts. But there are also immoral and amoral people in the world, mean people, hurtful people, *bad* people. God's law is written on their hearts as well, for condemnation. God doesn't see any difference between these two groups; that's because of the first tablet. Both groups do what they do without considering God, his existence, sovereignty, majesty, love, justice, or glory. They "despise" God, treating him indifferently, and ignoring his existence. All of us fall into one group or the other. None of us is capable of completely and sincerely obeying both tablets. We have a corrupt nature, tainted by our sin, and the sins of our first father, Adam.

Because we have violated one or both of the tablets through our own arrogance and pride (the cause of sin), we have been separated from God. We are separated from his love, from his fellowship, and from the eternal life we would have enjoyed in him. Worse than that, we are at war with God; we live in fear and dread of punishment. Why? Because each sin incurs a debt that needs to be repaid to God for offending him. What kind of debt? An infinite debt. You see, a sin against an infinite God incurs an infinite debt. What's the penalty for non-payment? Death, and hell – eternal punishment in the flames. We are all eternal beings. The only question is where we will spend eternity, in heaven or in hell?

This presents a dilemma for us and for God. God is a just God. He requires that the debt for our sin be paid to uphold his Justice. However, we are incapable of paying an infinite debt because we are finite beings. But God is also a loving God and wants us to be redeemed from our

¹⁴ Matt. 15:6; Lk. 8:11; 11:28; Jn. 10:35

¹⁵ Rev. 19:13

¹⁶ Matt. 16:15; Mk. 8:29; Lk. 9:20

¹⁷ Matt. 26:61; Jn. 10:25, 38; 14:11; Heb. 2:2-4

¹⁸ Rom. 1:4; 1Cor. 15:13-14

debt. To resolve this dilemma, he chose to pay our debt himself. And so he chose a people for himself and placed them into his Son's hands to redeem them. He established them as a nation. He gave them his Bible. And he made a covenant with them. All through the OT he promised to fulfill the covenant. He promised to make his home with us. He promised to redeem his people. He promised a suffering servant who would take our punishment on himself. When the time was right, he sent his son, Jesus Christ, to fulfill the role of the suffering servant.

Jesus is God in fleshly form. Jesus is also an historical personality. By nature he is fully man and yet fully God. Jesus is the Son of God. In fact, he is God in fleshly form. He was not less than God in his wisdom and power, nor more than man in his suffering and humiliation. He lived a perfect life, wholly pleasing to the Father, fully satisfying the requirements of God's law, and completely righteous. He was nailed to a cross by wicked men, and yet he went to the cross willingly. It was there that he paid the penalty of death on our behalf. He was an offering to God to satisfy that debt.

Jesus died on the cross. He was buried. And then, on the third day, just as the Bible said he would, he rose from the dead. Through his resurrection he presented himself to the Father as a perfect offering, pleasing in God's sight. He proved to men that he was the promised Messiah of the OT. After his resurrection, he appeared to over 500 of his followers, staying in the presence of his closest disciples for forty days. In his life, he was perfectly obedient, satisfying the requirements of God's Law. On the cross he suffered the punishment of his Father on our behalf for our failure to obey. The penalty for our sin having been paid, and the wrath of God having been turned away from us, we are freed from the guilt of the Law. More than that, the righteous life that Jesus lived is considered to be ours, as if we had been perfectly obedient. That means we can return to God, and live with him forever. But there's a catch. We must receive this gift.

We must believe that Jesus is who he claims to be. We must submit to his will completely as it is revealed in the Bible. This is an act of faith and trust in the person of Jesus Christ. It is relying on the grace of God Almighty, and the power of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. We must admit that we have broken God's Law. We must promise to turn away from behavior motivated by our own selfish desires, and instead follow the example given to us by Jesus. This is an act of repentance empowered by God's Spirit in us, and emboldened by the fellowship we share in the Body. We must acknowledge that the only reason we'll ever join God in heaven is *not* because of something we have done, but only because of something that God has graciously done *for* us: He sent his only son to pay for our sin. That should put a damper on any pride or self-reliance we might have remaining.

When we believe, we lay hold of our eternal inheritance in God's kingdom that has been reserved for us from the foundation of the world. We are freed from our fear of death and punishment. Our purpose in life is no longer to live for ourselves but to live for the glory of God. The result is a life filled with love, joy, peace, purpose, and fulfillment. And the source of the love is found in our own new-found capacity for forgiveness. We can forgive, because God has forgiven us. We can love, because God first loved us.

The history of discipline in the Church is the history of the preservation and transmission of this gospel message.